THE PEOPLE'S WATCHDOG

choice

FEBRUARY 2011 • WWW.CHOICE.COM.AU

Space-age stores

Innovations designed to make supermarket shopping quicker and easier – but do they?

A weighty issue

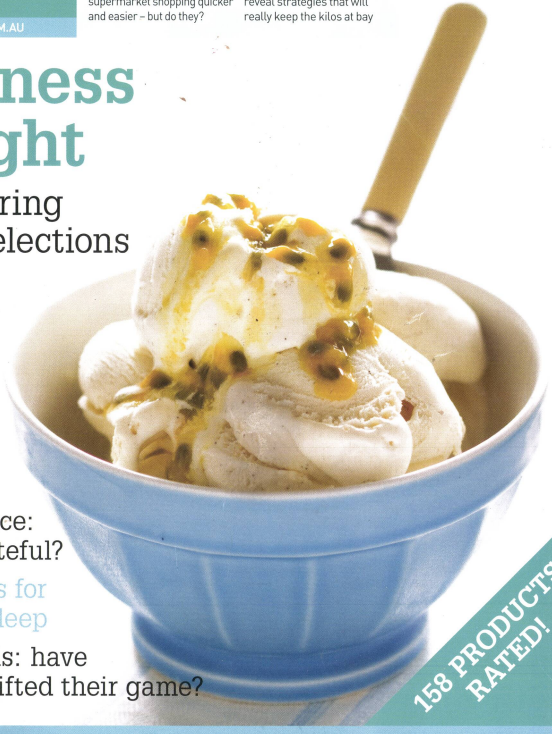
We expose the myths and reveal strategies that will really keep the kilos at bay

Lab tests

Blu-ray players
Dishwashers
Vacuum cleaners
Steam irons
Landline phones
Energy-efficient light bulbs
Microwaves

Sweetness and light

Mouth-watering ice-cream selections



PLUS

Funeral insurance: windfall or wasteful?

The best pillows for a good night's sleep

Breakfast cereals: have manufacturers lifted their game?

158 PRODUCTS RATED!

Car insurance: top policies for your location and circumstances

New Year, new challenges

The recent tragic floods have exposed flaws in the current insurance regime that CHOICE is looking to help rectify

It's been an immensely challenging start to 2011 for many Aussies, particularly those living in flood-hit areas. Almost everyone knows someone who's been affected by the floods, whether it's a damaged home, loss of business or, worse still, a missing family member. Our thoughts are with those who've lost so much.

CHOICE has redoubled our efforts to support those most in need, not only by contributing financially to the relief fund but also by focusing on issues where we believe we can bring some benefit and peace of mind. The floods have exposed flaws in the current insurance regime that we explore further at **www.choice.com.au/floodinsurance**. We're stepping up our campaign work in this area, particularly around developing a standard definition of flood and the formation of more consumer-friendly insurance documents so people are able to better understand what they are and are not covered for. As a practical measure, we encourage members to look online at our updated list of insurance companies that include flood protection in their policies. We'll also be doing all we can to support affected members with practical information as they look to replace their damaged possessions.

From day one, my focus has been to bring myself and everyone at CHOICE closer to you, our members. Our call centre is operated by real people at the heart of CHOICE HQ, and we recently recruited a Membership Manager, Rawya Jammal, specifically to champion your needs. From next month, we'll also be publishing a Members' Noticeboard in your magazine. This will be your page, so please let us know what you'd like to see on it. We'll start with updates on our latest campaigns, details of upcoming public events for you to attend and competitions with some great prizes. Each month we'll also put a member in the spotlight, highlighting their views on CHOICE as well as their wider interests. So if you're keen to share your story with fellow members, email Rawya at **members@choice.com.au**. You can also call her on (02) 9577 3285 or write to her at: Member in the Spotlight, CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville, NSW 2204.

I'm delighted to see members making their views known on our website, particularly recently with regard to shopping and the campaign by some big retailers to impose GST on online overseas sales for purchases less than $1000. The vast majority of you agree it's the retailers' game that needs to be upped, not the tax. Turn to pages 11 and 12 for some highlights of your views and those of small businesses on this hot topic.

Finally, we'd also like to communicate with you about these and other initiatives and events as they happen. You can let us know your email address in several ways:

- If you're already an online subscriber, log into your existing account and update or complete your details
- Fill in the coupon on the front of the cover sheet that comes with your magazine and send it back to us
- Email us at **ausconsumer@choice.com.au** with your name, contact number and address
- Contact us on (02) 9577 3399.

Nick Stace, CEO
Phone 1800 266 786

CHOICE. The People's Watchdog

CHOICE gives you the power to choose the very best goods and services, and avoid the worst. We pay full price for the products we test, so we remain 100% independent. We don't take advertising and we don't accept freebies from industry.

We're not a government body and our consumer publishing and advocacy is almost entirely funded by subscriptions to our magazines, to **www.choice.com.au** and from other services we supply for the benefit of consumers.

CHOICE product ratings are based on lab tests, expert assessments and consumer surveys. CHOICE staff also research a wide range of consumer services. They reveal the truth behind the facts and figures, and investigate the quality and the claims.

SUBSCRIBE CHOICE Plus personal: $33 per quarter for magazine and full online access; ***CHOICE*** personal subscription: one year $86, two years $154.80; Company/institution: one year $172, two years $309.60.

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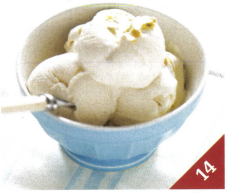
CHOICE EXTRA Magazine subscribers can request back copies of articles at **www.choice.com.au/choiceextra**.



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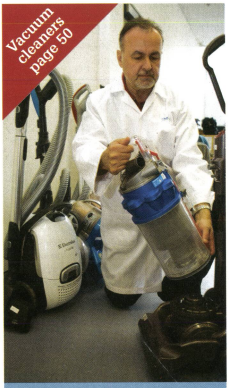

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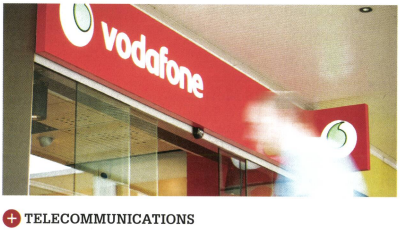
By the banks' own logic, there was no justification for any of the Big Four to raise interest rates on last year's Melbourne Cup day



TELECOMMUNICATIONS

VODAFONE UNDER FIRE Thousands of dissatisfied Vodafone consumers are turning to online forums and websites such as Vodafail.com to air their grievances regarding the network's technical failures. Customers have complained about incessantly dropped calls and subsequent high bills, lost or late text and voicemail messages, a lack of mobile internet reception and extended hold times on customer service lines.

About 12,000 unsatisfied customers have also registered their interest in a class action against the carrier. A statement released by Piper Alderman, the law firm running the possible action, states that "calls dropping out, reception issues, poor data performance – this is not what Vodafone customers signed up for. Vodafone, however, has continued to charge customers on its mobile plans, without providing the service it promised." The firm is also considering complaints about Vodafone's recent alleged privacy breach, in which personal information of up to 4,000,000 customers may have been made available on the internet. Customers can register interest at www.piperalderman.com.au/vf.

ZOYA SHEFTALOVICH

BANKING

Big Four caught in fib

The major banks are playing fast and loose with the truth when justifying extra mortgage rate increases.

The Reserve Bank of Australia (RBA) has put into disarray the Big Four banks' justification for going above last year's official RBA increase of 0.25% on Melbourne Cup Day.

The banks claimed they were facing higher funding costs themselves. International finance had yet to shake off the global downturn and they were still paying higher-than-normal interest rates on money borrowed from overseas banks. But the RBA begged to differ. In its November 2010 submission to a Senate inquiry into competition in the banking sector, the RBA said that "since mid-2009, the major banks' overall funding costs are estimated to have moved broadly in line with the cash rate, reflecting offsetting factors". In other words, the world of international finance had settled down by November and funding costs were back on track. The Big Four didn't need to stick it to home loan customers because they had already put the squeeze on them during the height of the crisis.

The RBA report indicates banks raised mortgage interest rates by as much as 120 basis points above the cash rate from mid-2007 to early 2009, when the banks legitimately faced higher funding costs from overseas. By November 2010, those costs were back in line with the domestic cash rate. So, by the banks' own logic, there was no justification for CBA raising rates by 0.45%, NAB by 0.43%, ANZ by 0.39% and Westpac by 0.35%.

ANDY KOLLMORGEN

CHOICE ONLINE
Log on to **www.choice.com.au/betterbanking** to compare, ditch and switch your bank.

FOOD

Kilojoules coming to a menu near you

From this month, major fast food outlets, juice bars and supermarkets in NSW, as well as coffee, bakery, ice-cream and doughnut chains, will display the energy content of foods on menus.

New legislation requires all businesses that sell standard food items and have 20 or more outlets in NSW (or 50 or more nationally) to display the average energy content of each standard item in kilojoules. A reference to the average adult daily energy intake of 8700kJ must also be shown. Standard food items can include burgers, fries, salads, wraps, muffins, cakes, smoothies and coffees. Pre-packaged foods that already carry nutritional information panels are excluded from the laws, as are convenience stores, service stations, caterers, food sold at healthcare facilities and retail food businesses with no takeaway option.

Victoria announced similar plans early last year, with implementation set for 2012. The Australia and New Zealand Food Regulation Ministerial Council has agreed to develop advice on a national approach by mid-2011.

"Consumers should have the same information, regardless of whether they're eating in Victoria or the NT," says CHOICE Senior Food Policy Advisor, Clare Hughes. "A nationally consistent approach would also benefit food businesses operating across Australia."

A 12-month lead-in period applies to NSW's new rules; enforcement and a review will commence from February 2012.

HANNAH GREW

HEALTH

Painkillers: think twice

Mild painkillers may be partly responsible for the increase in male reproductive disorders of recent decades.

A new study suggests that women taking a combination of more than one mild analgesic (paracetamol, aspirin or ibuprofen) during pregnancy, or taking any such painkiller during the second trimester of pregnancy, may lead to an increased risk of giving birth to sons with undescended testicles (cryptorchidism) – a condition known to be a risk factor for poor semen quality and testicular germ cell cancer in later life.

Research carried out by the same group found that analgesics disrupted the production of androgen in rats, leading to insufficient supplies of testosterone during the crucial early period of gestation when the male organs are forming. The effect was comparable to that caused by similar doses of known endocrine (hormone) disrupters such as phthalates, a family of chemical compounds used to soften plastics, some of which are currently banned in toys and cosmetics in the EU.

These findings come hot on the heels of research reporting that some painkillers – specifically, non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) – are linked with an increased risk of heart attack and stroke. Ibuprofen (e.g. Nurofen) and naproxen (e.g. Naprosyn) appear to be the safest options, with celecoxib (Celebrex) and diclofenac (e.g. Voltaren) less safe. Aspirin, although an NSAID, has been found to protect against stroke, but it can be dangerous for people with certain conditions.

While the absolute risk to any individual is very small, the research underscores general recommendations to limit consumption of painkillers – particularly if you have an increased risk of stroke – and to use paracetamol, which isn't an anti-inflammatory, for management of chronic pain (see our story on headache medication in *CHOICE*, September 2010, page 26, and on stroke and heart disease in *CHOICE*, May 2010, page 21, for more).

In better news regarding painkillers, a small (75mg) daily dose of aspirin has been found to reduce the risk of cancer by up to 34%. However, aspirin is not suitable for everyone, so seek medical advice before taking it regularly and bear in mind that lifestyle changes such as quitting smoking, a healthy diet, exercising, reducing alcohol consumption and sun protection can also cut the risks. **KARINA BRAY**

NUMBER CRUNCH

4.6%
The annual decrease in consumer complaints to the Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman (TIO – 167,955 made in total);

81%
The increase in grievances regarding roaming charges on mobile services;

71%
The increase in issues regarding charges for internet usage on a mobile phone.

(Source: 2010 TIO Annual Report.)

IN BRIEF

CLOTHES NOT FOR CHARITY

Allround Recycling Pty Ltd has replaced signage on more than 150 clothes collection bins to make clear the commercial nature of their business. The ACCC was concerned that Allround Recycling's use of words, images and logos of registered charities could mislead consumers into viewing the for-profit recycling business as a charity. In reality, the company collects unwanted clothing and textiles, buys excess textiles from charity and other organisations and exports them to developing countries for resale.

POWER'S OUT

Power Balance products, which claim to improve balance, strength and flexibility, have been confirmed as fraudulent by the ACCC. CHOICE has been making this assertion since we independently tested the product in August 2010 and found it had no effect on performance. ACCC Chairman, Graeme Samuel, acknowledged that "CHOICE listed the Power Balance among its Shonky Awards and quite accurately said the only effect was on emptying wallets."

GREEN LIGHT FOR LABELLING

54% of health sector and 67% of state and territory governments' submissions agree that a traffic light scheme would be a good approach to front-of-pack labelling – a position long championed by CHOICE – according to an analysis of 449 submissions made to the Review of Food Labelling Law and Policy. Most food manufacturers support the Food and Grocery Council's Daily Intake Guide (DIG) scheme. The Review's final report and recommendations will be publicly released soon.

ISTOCK PHOTO

"Australians should be aware that, as with any new food, they may react adversely to it. We'd like FSANZ to continue monitoring this and take action as required."

AUSTRALIAN MADE

AMAG APP

The Australian Made, Australian Grown (AMAG) Campaign has launched an Apple iPhone and iPad application called "Buy Australian" that allows users to go on a virtual shopping trip and browse more than 10,000 products that are licensed to carry the AMAG logo (above). It's available free from the iTunes store: www.apple.com/au/itunes/.

FOOD

Call for Quorn ban

Not everyone is happy about a meat substitute product's debut onto the local market.

The Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) in the US is advocating a ban on Quorn, citing excessive adverse reaction reports from consumers – which now includes Australians.

With more than 100 products, including mince, sausages and schnitzels, Quorn, which claims to be the "world's favourite meat-free, soy-free food", is a protein rich in amino acids and dietary fibre and low in cholesterol and fat. The base ingredient is mycoprotein, which is derived from *Fusarium venenatum*, a mould belonging to the fungi family.

In a letter to the Australian food regulator, FSANZ, in September last year, CSPI's executive director, Michael Jacobson, argued that mycoprotein in Quorn foods is a "powerful allergen", and at the time CSPI had received more than 1500 adverse reports. Symptoms included nausea, violent vomiting, hives and potentially fatal anaphylactic reactions, though so far no fatalities have been identified; Jacobson estimated hundreds more consumers have been sick for every report received.

Quorn products were first sold in the UK in 1985, where more than 500,000 Quorn meals are now eaten daily. In Australia, FSANZ says two consumers have contacted them reporting possible Quorn-related gastric upsets; the regulator will be taking appropriate risk-management measures, such as labelling, as necessary.

"Unlike other known allergens such as nuts, seafood and eggs, the fact that the Quorn mycoprotein is relatively new to Australians' diets means people won't know if they're allergic to it until they try it," says CHOICE Senior Food Policy Advisor, Clare Hughes. "Australians should be aware that, as with any new food, they may react adversely to it. We'd like FSANZ to continue monitoring this and take action as required."

Allergy and intolerance experts suggest that reactions to Quorn may be linked to those with pre-existing asthma or reaction to respiratory moulds rather than a food allergy itself.

If you believe you've reacted adversely to a Quorn product, seek medical advice and notify your health authority.

HANNAH GREW

BUILT TO LAST?

Do you have an old stove, washing machine, toaster, sewing machine or any other appliance that continues to perform today? What year did you buy the appliance? What brand is it? Alternatively, have you bought an appliance that's broken down within weeks or even days of purchasing? Could it be fixed or did it need replacement? Please email your stories, along with a picture of your appliance if possible, to **stories@choice.com.au.**

CORRECTIONS

In our recent review of eBook readers (see *CHOICE*, December 2010/January 2011, page 47), we incorrectly listed the Sony PRS-350 as supporting the MP3 file format and the Stash W950 as supporting PNG format.

And our review of kitchen utensils in the same issue (page 67) incorrectly priced the Zyliss Essentials Safety Can Opener at $4; the correct price is $24. Although this makes it one of the more expensive can openers, we still recommend it for its ease of use.

CAR INSURANCE

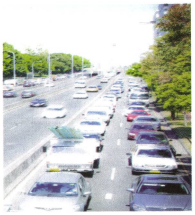
Review before you renew

Our latest car insurance satisfaction survey indicates insurers continue to quote lower premiums to new customers than for renewing customers – for the same policies.

More than 2500 CHOICE members recently took part in our online car insurance satisfaction survey. Many are unhappy that their loyalty is not being rewarded by insurers (see Hear Us Out, right).

While close to half the respondents shopped around the last time their insurance was due for renewal, seven out of 10 had not changed insurers in the past five years. Interestingly, a number of respondents reported receiving a quote as a new customer that was lower than the renewal with their insurer, and successfully demanded their insurer match the quote. Overall, respondents had been with their current insurance policy for an average of seven years.

Only one in five survey participants were dissatisfied with their car insurer, with RAA (available only in SA and Broken Hill), Shannons and Apia receiving higher-than-average satisfaction ratings than others. (Shannons focuses on insuring motor enthusiasts and classic cars, while Apia only insures those aged over 50 who are not working full-time or are actively planning to retire.)



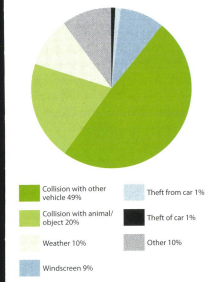
Collision was the most common reason for making a claim; close to 50% of claims were due to collision with another vehicle and 20% to collision with an animal or object (see pie chart, below). More than half of all claims were settled in one week or less, with claims for windscreen damage more likely to be settled immediately and claims related to weather damage more likely than average to be settled in a month or longer.

For respondents who made at least one claim in the past year, 83% did not report problems with the handling of claims by their insurer, with Allianz having a higher satisfaction rating than others. The main problems respondents encountered during the claims process include delays in handling the claim by the insurance company or agent, as well as delays in repairs.

To find out our Best Buys and each insurer's satisfaction rating for car insurance, turn to page 36. **CECILIA LEE**

Source: CHOICE member insurance satisfaction survey – 2520 participants for comprehensive car insurance in August 2010. Results are only reported for insurers for which we received 30 or more responses.

REASONS FOR CLAIMS



HEAR US OUT

Of those survey respondents who were dissatisfied with some aspect of their insurer, more than half reported high premiums as one of the causes. Here are some comments from CHOICE members about their dissatisfaction:

- "They doubled my premium after one claim of $2200."
- "It's hard to get through and get to a repairer. Also, if I get lower quotes and present them, they'll always reduce the premium quoted in my automatic renewal notice, which is a pain and doesn't make ongoing customers feel valued!"
- "My premium goes up even though they put the value of my car down – and I have not made any claims in 30 years."
- "They treat you like a criminal even when you make a 'no fault' claim."
- "It took them nine months to fix my new car."
- "There is no assessor in Hobart, so I had to take digital photos that were assessed via email. That makes it difficult to pick up the extent of damage, which results in delays accepting claims."
- "I found that 'rating one for life' means nothing with some insurers. Make a claim, and your premium will increase dramatically."

Many CHOICE members are unhappy that their loyalty is not being rewarded by car insurers

The T-Box is a good-value option if you want a simple-to-use DVR, but make sure you have at least an ADSL2 connection

DIGITAL VIDEO RECORDERS

T-Box or TiVo?

Which DVR is right for you?

Telstra's T-Box is an internet-enabled digital video recorder (DVR) available to buy either outright or as part of an overall internet plan on Telstra's BigPond network. The T-Box enables you to watch and record free-to-air TV shows and also stream several BigPond internet TV channels using either an ADSL2 or BigPond cable connection.

The T-Box's small notebook hard drive is 320GB, however only 200GB is available for recording shows, with the remaining capacity kept for Telstra's software and a timeshift feature that allows you to pause and rewind a live TV show. Although you don't need to be with BigPond to hook up the box to a TV aerial and record shows, you do need to register the T-Box using your BigPond account to get all the internet TV features and seven-day electronic programming guide (EPG).

The T-Box has two HD digital TV tuners, but unlike many other DVRs doesn't allow you to record two shows at the same time – one tuner is used for viewing live TV while the other is used to record a show on another channel. BigPond customers can download as much video from the T-Box's seven internet channels as they please without affecting their monthly internet data allocation. You can also rent movies online and have them delivered unmetered to your T-Box to watch (only once) at your leisure.

Telstra recommends an ADSL2 broadband connection for watching IPTV and our trial user agrees, as she found the T-Box's performance when using her standard BigPond ADSL connection was frustratingly slow. The remote is basic yet functional and communicates via radio signals, so you don't need direct line of sight to operate the unit.

TELSTRA T-BOX
Price $299
Contact www.telstra.com.au
★★★☆☆

CHOICE VERDICT

If you want a simple-to-use DVR that integrates well with your BigPond account, the T-Box is a good-value option, but make sure you have at least an ADSL2 connection speed to enjoy the internet TV channels on offer. **DENIS GALLAGHER**

When we first looked at the 160GB TiVo two years ago, we were impressed with its simple on-screen menus and comprehensive seven-day EPG. The latest 320GB incarnation is still very simple to use once you get used to its menu system and odd-shaped remote. Its ability to match your viewing preferences with its automated suggestions, which it records on a temporary basis, can discover otherwise unnoticed gems lurking in late-night or daytime time slots.

However, there are some downsides:

- It has no on-board controls and so can't be operated if the remote is lost or damaged. You can use the remote scheduling functions on a phone app or the TiVo website, but you can't watch your recorded programs.
- The remote's numeric buttons are small and closely spaced. Most of the other buttons are grey and labelled in white, making them difficult to read.
- Once recorded, programs can't be changed in any way using the TiVo itself and there are no thumbnail images. You can rename or reformat them for a portable device if you've bought the separate networking package ($99) and transferred them to your computer (both processes tend to be slow).
- There's no "skip forward" function to get through ads and station promos quickly, though you can fast-forward and its clever jump-back feature takes you back a few seconds when you stop fast-forwarding, so you're not continually trying to find the exact start point for your program.

TIVO 320GB DVR
Price $699
Contact www.tivo.com.au
★★★★☆

- A lack of internet connection can cause the TiVo to limit its functions after a couple of days, because it can't find information for its EPG. On the upside, you're not tied to any particular ISP (as with the Telstra T-Box) and a number of ISPs allow free downloads from the CASPA On-Demand pay per movie download service supported on TiVo.

CHOICE VERDICT

TiVo remains one of the smartest and easiest-to-use DVRs on the market, but it's relatively expensive, particularly if you purchase the Wi-Fi, software and extra capacity add-ons. **CHRIS RUGGLES**

CHOICE ONLINE
TiVo or T-Box? Log on to **www.choice.com.au/tivovstbox** to see two of our experts discuss whether Telstra's latest offering is a serious alternative to the well-known TiVo.

DIGITAL UTENSILS

Handy or hopeless?

How much value does digital technology really bring to conventional cooking utensils?

At first glance, these long tongs, featuring an in-built thermometer preset with seven meat types and cooking preferences, seem an ideal BBQ accessory – simply select the meat type and how well you want it cooked (medium rare, medium or well done) to take the guesswork out of removing meat from the hotplate.

DIGITAL BBQ TONGS NW-E577
Price $49.95 + $10 per delivery
Contact www.newwavekitchenappliances.com.au
★★★★★

We tried these tongs on steak, chicken breast and sausages; inaccurate in-built temperature settings for how well you want your meat cooked meant the steak we set to medium rare was overcooked. They also allowed the chicken breast to be overcooked, leaving it dry, whereas the sausages were slightly raw in the centre (there's no sausage setting so we used the burger setting). You can alter the temperature settings yourself to get a better result, though you shouldn't have to. Strong hand pressure is required to squeeze the tongs for the temperature probe to be inserted, so they're not easy to use; they also have an annoying knack of locking themselves closed while you're using them. And to get temperature readings, you need to regularly probe the meat, which releases juices, making it tough and dry.

CHOICE VERDICT

You don't need a temperature probe to tell you when your steak is ready. Using the "rule of thumb" method – comparing the firmness of the meat with the fleshy part of your hand directly under your thumb (see CHOICE Online, below, for more) – is the easiest and best way to ensure excellent results every time – and it's free. **MARTHA PSIROUKIS**

To get temperature readings using the Digital BBQ Tongs, you need to regularly probe the meat, which releases juices and makes it tough and dry

COMING

Slow cookers are back in vogue – set one up in the morning before you leave, and a hot, tasty and cheap meal is waiting for you when you arrive home. We put 10 on test priced between $25 and $200 to find out if spending more guarantees a better-quality cooker.

With analog TV soon to be switched off for good, a **digital set-top box** is an inexpensive way to ensure you can watch the many channels digital TV now has to offer. Discover our Best Buy from 12 on test.

Is it time to upgrade to a **smartphone**? We check out the latest offerings, and also compare fixed-line and mobile phone plans to find out whether you should hang up on your landline.

This digital scale allows you to weigh in ounces or grams directly from the spoon. It has a tare feature that brings the reading back to zero so you can weigh additional ingredients. It shuts itself off after two minutes and has a low-battery alert, as well as teaspoon and tablespoon gradings. As the gradings are along the inside of the spoon, you cannot level it as you would a standard measuring spoon, making it harder to get an accurate result. It's very accurate when weighing 5g and 20g increments of flour and sugar, but you have to place it on a bench to ensure accurate readings. However, most recipes will give small amounts of ingredients in teaspoon or tablespoon measurements, meaning you'll have to convert these to a weight estimate, which may not be as accurate as using standard measuring spoons.

CHOICE VERDICT

This tool may be useful if most of your recipes list small amounts by weight. However, using standard measuring spoons and/or a good set of kitchen scales is faster, with less fiddling about. **MARTHA PSIROUKIS**

DIGITAL SPOON SCALE NWE5494
Price $29.95 + $10 per delivery
Contact www.newwavekitchenappliances.com.au
★★★★★

CHOICE ONLINE
Log on to **www.choice.com.au/cook** to find out how to prepare the perfect steak.

YOUR SAY

Your experiences help our research and often inform other readers about scams and rip-offs. Positive responses you've had to a complaint you took to a manufacturer, retailer, importer or tradesperson interest us too, so please email ausconsumer@choice.com.au or send mail to Your Say, CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville, NSW 2204.

What about self-insurance?

Reading your story on home and contents insurance (see *CHOICE*, November 2010, page 37), it occurred to me that few people consider all their options. In the early 1980s, I built my home in a bushfire-prone area. For the first couple of years, I had insurance and the high risk attracted high premiums. Then I did my sums, and worked out that within two decades, I'd have paid more in premiums than the value of the house and its contents. So, instead of paying premiums to an insurance company, I invested an equivalent amount in other portfolios. After almost three decades, I have accumulated enough to replace my home and its contents several times over.

Observing insurance companies delay, deny and highlight weasel words in obscure paragraphs, I believe I've made the right choice. For your next story, perhaps you could consider analysing self-insurance as an alternative.

David Boxall, Mount View, NSW

CHOICE SAYS **Whether or not self-insurance is a good option for you depends on the risk of damage, the cost of your premiums and the value of your home and contents. Most people would find their insurance premiums make up a very small proportion of their home and contents value, and even a lifetime of premiums still wouldn't cover the total value of the home and contents, so it's unlikely they'd benefit from self-insurance in the event of their home being totally destroyed.**

Self-insurance may be worth investigating if you pay very high premiums. However, consider what would happen if your house was destroyed when you'd just started saving.

Exchange rate rip-off

When you shop online, many overseas merchants charge you in Australian dollars ($A). As banks and other credit card providers usually charge at least 3% for a currency conversion, this may seem like a good deal. But, as I discovered, you should first compare the $A price the seller is offering against the official exchange rates for the merchant's home currency. I found a US website selling a T-shirt for $A29.50. The $US price was $25, which worked out to be $A25.41, so the seller was pocketing $A4.09. Even with the 3% conversion fee, I'd have only paid $A26.17 if paying the $US rate.

Dr T.C. Puckett, Brisbane, Qld

CHOICE SAYS **Many people have been stung by lousy exchange rates. If you make a lot of international transactions, the 28 Degrees MasterCard (www.28degreescard.com.au) charges no international exchange fees. A popular exchange rate site is www.xe.com.**

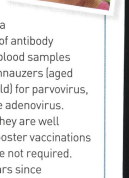
THUMBS UP!

Kira McRae of Melbourne, Vic, tells us she has some old secateurs imported and distributed by 2WP International for which she has twice needed spare parts. "Firstly, it's marvellous that parts are available and secondly, it's a delight that their staff are knowledgeable and helpful. The service rep with whom I spoke quickly determined my needs and dispatched the right bits (once without charge), and instructions on how to fit them."

Breville impressed **Alan Bailey** of Moggill, Qld, by sending him a new kettle when all he asked for was the address of a servicing agent to fix his old one that was "well out of warranty".

EMAIL OF THE MONTH

A doggy tale



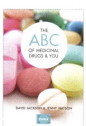
After reading "A Dog of an Issue" (*CHOICE*, September 2010, page 32), I instigated a clinical investigation of antibody titres (quantities) on blood samples from my two mini schnauzers (aged six and seven years old) for parvovirus, distemper and canine adenovirus. The results showed they are well protected and that booster vaccinations for these diseases are not required.

It has been two years since they had their last vaccinations because of my mounting concerns since reading earlier scientific data on the subject. Thanks for your very timely story.

Carol Pearson, Wyee, NSW

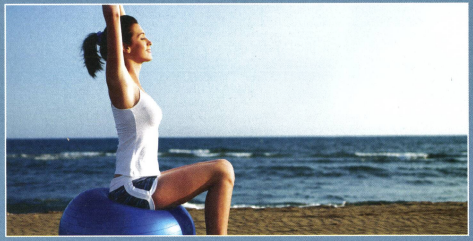
CHOICE SAYS **Thank you for your letter, Carol, and well done on taking action after reading our story. Many other CHOICE members have shared their pet vaccination experiences at www.choice.com.au/pet**

EMAIL OF THE MONTH Carol receives *The ABC of Medicinal Drugs and You*, or any other book of her choice at **www.choice.com.au/books**. Unfortunately we are unable to answer all the emails and letters we receive. We reserve the right to edit or print only an extract.



ONLINE THIS MONTH

The hot topic that kicked off the New Year for CHOICE was the debate over online shopping, as we locked horns with some of the country's biggest retailers over our defence of the $1000 GST-free threshold on offshore purchases (see page 12 for more). Your comments certainly seem to support our stance. Meanwhile, our online Summer Guide (**www.choice.com.au/summer**) covers everything from weight-loss myths to the best health and fitness products as recommended by our testers.



Online shopping

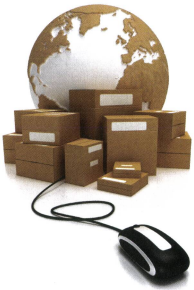
www.choice.com.au/GSTonline

Australians can currently buy goods online from overseas and not pay GST for products less than $1000 – and the big retailers aren't happy. The controversy has widened into a more general concern about Australian retail prices. Here's just a small sample of the many comments you've made online.

David Gollan: Manufacturers, distributors and retailers should try reducing their prices. The prices charged in Australia for many goods are disgustingly high compared with overseas.

Sean Slavin: I only ever buy clothes when on trips to the US, and even with sales tax as high as 17% in some US states, comparable products are often half the price. It's about the size of the market, but we're always being told we live in a global marketplace, so why shouldn't we enjoy some of the benefits as well as having to bear the pressures?

Tuff Guy: What I would like to see come out of all this is a true breakdown of all costs and margins in Australian retailing – how much do THEY buy the stuff for, how much profit are they making, how much in operating costs (wages, rents, etc)? Retailers always cry poor, yet they still make profits while holding massive sales with 50%-80% off the original prices – so just how much is their mark-up?



Smartphone guide for dummies

Whether you're in the market for a new mobile phone or are just a smartphone novice, it's well worth checking out some of the introductory videos and guides our CHOICE experts have recently added online.

Five things you need to know before buying a new mobile phone (**www.choice.com.au/mobileguide**) is a video that takes you through everything from basic smartphone offerings to apps, common operating systems and how to avoid excess data charges.

www.choice.com.au/HTCshopping

This blog takes you on one CHOICE geek's journey as he painstakingly road-tests various phones before eventually settling on the HTC Desire.

If you're tossing up between the popular HTC Desire (an Android phone) and the ubiquitous iPhone, be sure to watch our video that outlines the pros and cons of both at **www.choice.com.au/phonebattles**.

If Nokia is your thing, check out our First Look video of the NokiaN8 to see it in action and hear our verdict at **www.choice.com.au/N8**.

To view all our tests and reviews of phones and mobile devices, visit **www.choice.com.au/smartphones**.

Buyers should always bear in mind the added costs of shopping online as well as the loss of warranty protection

ONLINE SHOPPING

Retail revolution

Big retailers are calling for GST on low-value imports, but it is technology and convenience, not any one tax, that's driving the online shopping revolution.

A few months ago, CHOICE began receiving long and sometimes angry telephone calls from small businesses taking issue with our stated opposition to any premature crackdown on the tax-free threshold for low-value imports. Consumers can import goods GST-free up to the value of $1000 and applies whether you're ordering online or via snail mail – but given the internet's seductive speed, most do the former. This threshold has been around for years, and some argue the value has barely kept up with inflation. But one thing that has changed is the rate at which consumers are ordering goods from overseas.

What small businesses say

One small-garment importer who contacted CHOICE told us he faces a plethora of charges, including GST, duty, customs and quarantine, which makes it impossible to compete with online sites overseas. He claimed consumers are damaging Australian businesses and their employees by sending their dollars to countries that don't pay holiday leave, workers' compensation, long service leave and so on.

Another business owner who imports high-end bicycle parts also cried foul. He told us of a UK site that sells cranks, chains and cotter pins far cheaper than he could ever hope to source – a site that also sends everything to Australia freight-free.

A more conciliatory call came from a woman who runs a wedding dress business in the bush and whose $2000 creations face "competition" from $100 copies made in China. She told us that brides-to-be frequently come into her store heartbroken and helpless days before their nuptials when their online cheapies arrive and don't measure up to the pictures on the screen. Her concerns about the online versus in-store debate have nothing to do with reducing or removing the GST threshold, but rather with educating consumers about the potential risks of online shopping. She also wants to see greater public and industry discussion about the environmental and ethical issues surrounding this kind of transaction, not just for the Chinese market but also the future of our retail landscape.

What CHOICE says

CHOICE believes the competitive pressure from overseas online sites being felt by Australian businesses, large and small, results from the confluence of a number of factors that will both wax and wane. These factors include the high Australian dollar, the spread of high-speed broadband, growing confidence in the security of online shopping, improved sites and the remarkable publicity surrounding the potential savings. Combined, these factors have created a virtual gold rush for bargain-hungry shoppers, who also cite poor in-store customer service, convenience and choice as reasons for shopping online.

However, buyers should always bear in mind the added costs of shopping online, such as postage and packaging and credit card transaction fees, as well as the loss of warranty protection enjoyed with onshore purchases.

We applaud the federal government's plan for the Productivity Commission to investigate the broader issues around the retail industry. Many industries, such as music, movies and media, have had to adapt to the opportunities and onslaught of the online revolution; traditional retailers should be no different. **CHRISTOPHER ZINN**

CHOICE ONLINE

What savings have you made when shopping online? What can traditional retailers do to improve your in-store shopping experience? Share your stories with us and other shoppers at **www.choice.com.au/onlineshopping**

NUTSHELL

>> Across all products surveyed, nine out of 10 *CHOICE Computer* members would buy the same brand again, with Apple leading for both reliability and customer loyalty.

>> For the full story on *CHOICE Computer's* Technology Reliability Survey, see *CHOICE Computer*, November/December 2010. To subscribe, call 1800 069 552 or log on to **www.choice.com.au/magazines**

STORY BEN BRIDGES

Old reliable

CHOICE Computer members reveal the most reliable brands for your next personal computer package.

A recent *CHOICE Computer* survey canvassed the experiences of almost 3300 readers regarding the reliability of their computer brands, types and parts (see *CHOICE Computer*, November/December 2010, page 16). Feedback was mostly positive, with more than 97% of monitors, external drives and printers needing no repairs in the past 12 months, and desktops and laptops improving since the last survey in 2008.

Laptop computers are growing in popularity at the expense of desktops, with ownership of new desktops over five years falling from 67% to 63%, while ownership of new laptops has risen from 54% to 57%. See the table, right, for the most reliable laptop brands.

Desktops

Despite the laptop boom, *CHOICE Computer* members are still buying desktops, with 60% of desktop users having bought their machine in the past two years. More than 40% bought their desktops from one of three manufacturers, Dell, Apple and HP/Compaq, with the rest buying unbranded, custom-built or lesser-known brands.

Reliability A quarter of all users had problems in the past 12 months. The main suspect was the internal hard drive, which affected 6% of users. Just over 84% of machines needed no repairs in the past year, with **Apple** standing out at 97%.

Customer loyalty Brand loyalty was generally about 90%, except **Apple**, which rated a distinguished 99%, and Acer, trailing the field with 80%.

Laptops

The leading laptop brands mirror the desktop brands for market share, except for the strong presence of Toshiba at 17%, second to Dell (20%).

HOW WE SURVEY

Close to 3300 responses for this survey were received; all respondents are *CHOICE Computer* subscribers. All products in the survey were at least 12 months old and bought since 2006.

LAPTOP COMPUTERS – RELIABILITY

Brand (in rank order; number in brackets = sample size)	%age not needing repairs in the past 12 months*
Apple (253)	94
IBM / Lenovo (88)	93
Asus (220)	91
HP / Compaq (266)	90
Toshiba (309)	90
Acer (169)	87
Dell (381)	84
Other laptops (184) (A)	90
ALL LAPTOPS (1870)	89

USING THE TABLE All laptops are at least 12 months old and have been bought since 2006. **TABLE NOTES** * Repair percentages have been adjusted for age of machines. **(A)** Includes all other brands mentioned with fewer than 50 responses and all in the "unbranded" and "other" categories.

Reliability Laptop users reported slightly fewer problems (22%) than desktop users, but some brands – particularly Dell – fared badly. As with desktops, most problems did not require repair. The most common problem was with batteries. Once again, **Apple** came out top here (see above).

Customer loyalty Almost 90% of respondents were ready to buy their brand again. **Apple** again stood out with 99% brand loyalty, while Acer brought up the rear at 82%.

Printers

The four top printer brands, Canon, HP, Epson and Brother, account for 90% of printers in the survey, with Canon having the lion's share (40%). Inkjets are much more common than laser printers, and split fairly equally between multi-function (MFPs) and simple inkjet printers.

Reliability Across all categories, laser MFPs give the most trouble, with 18% having some problem in the past year. The most common issues were with rollers and paper feeds. By contrast, single-function laser printers were markedly more reliable.

Customer loyalty 90% of users indicated they would buy the same brand again. This ranges from a stellar 96% for **Canon** printers to a creditable 88% for Epson's multi-function inkjets. Brother and the minor brands trail at 82%-83%. ■

STORY REBECCA GATTO

What's the scoop?

Creamy, premium, low-fat – which vanilla ice-cream tastes best? CHOICE members and staff grab their spoons to find out.

NUTSHELL

>> CHOICE members and staff taste-tested 32 supermarket vanilla ice-creams.

>> Coles Classic Vanilla ice-cream tops our What to Buy list, while Woolworths Home Brand comes in at the bottom.

CHOICE ONLINE

For a jargon buster and some tips on ice-cream storage, see our online story at **www.choice.com.au/icecream**

I scream, you scream, we all scream for ice-cream. Australia's consumption of ice-cream is estimated at 18 litres per head, third only to New Zealand and the US, and it's one of Australia's fastest-growing grocery categories. Ice-cream comes in an array of varieties and its ideal creamy qualities depend on how the ingredients listed on the tub are blended together and in what ratio (see What's in the Tub?, page 16).

CHOICE recruited 60 members, as well as some eager staff, to taste-test 32 vanilla ice-creams, ranging from premium to low-fat and covering generic and leading brands. We asked them to rate each ice-cream on flavour, texture and overall taste, as well as whether or not they would buy it (see How We Analyse, page 16). Our recommended ice-creams (right) received the best overall ratings, with significantly more tasters rating them as "good", "very good" or "excellent" overall.

Interestingly, Woolworths Home Brand rated lowest overall – a finding at odds with our recent taste test of supermarket private label and premium brand products (see What's Happened to Home Brand?, page 16). The market leader, Peters, comes ninth on our list for its Original Vanilla ice-cream (see table, opposite).

The most expensive ice-cream on test, Homer Hudson Vanilla Nirvana, ranks towards the top of our list; however, you can buy the top-performing Coles Classic Vanilla Creamy at a fifth of the price. At the other end of the scale, the least expensive ice-creams rank at the bottom half of the table, so for this particular treat it's worth spending a little more.

Low-fat formulations

In response to consumer health concerns, more and more manufacturers are making low-fat ice-cream formulations; 13 on test are marketed as low- or reduced-fat or "light". Bear in mind, however, that "reduced fat" doesn't always mean low fat. By law, low-fat products cannot contain more than 3% fat, whereas reduced-fat products only need to have at least 25% less fat than their full-fat

WHAT TO BUY

BEST BUY

REGULAR/PREMIUM/CREAMY

Coles Classic Vanilla Creamy	31c/100mL
Weis Vanilla Bean	80c/100mL
Streets Blue Ribbon Extra Creamy	33c/100mL

LOW FAT & STILL TASTES GOOD

Peters Light and Creamy French Vanilla 37c/100mL

HEALTHIER OPTION

Bulla Light 98% Fat Free Vanilla 31c/100mL

equivalent. Three of the reduced-fat ice-creams on test are not low-fat, so always check the nutritional panel on the tub. Don't forget, too, that almost all these ice-creams have nutritional red lights for sugar content.

Our results suggest that tasters prefer premium and/or creamy ice-creams. The low-fat group generally received significantly lower scores for flavour, texture and overall taste, with ice-creams in this category being more likely to be described as "icy"and less likely to be judged as "creamy" or "smooth". **Peters Light and Creamy French Vanilla** is the best lower-fat ice-cream, comparing favourably with its regular counterparts for flavour. Tasters didn't describe its texture as "icy" (nor did they for **Peters Light and Creamy Classic Vanilla**) as they did with other low-fat ice-creams.

Bulla Light 98% Fat Free Vanilla has the equal-lowest number of kilojoules of all the ice-creams on test and gets a nutritional green light for both total and saturated fat. Almost half of our taste-testers said it had a "smooth" texture, with 63% saying they would be likely to buy it. >

ICE-CREAMS COMPARED	PERFORMANCE			NUTRITION				
Brand / item (in order of overall rating; alphabetical where equal)	**Overall score (%)**	**Flavour score (%)**	**Texture score (%)**	**Energy (kJ per 100g)**	**Total fat (per 100g)**	**Saturated fat (per 100g)**	**Sugars (per 100g)**	**Price per 100mL ($)**
Coles Classic Vanilla Creamy (A)	75	75	78	952	10.9 ▲	7.6 ■	26.2 ■	0.31
Weis Vanilla Bean	74	74	80	983	13.2 ▲	10.1 ■	23.4 ■	0.80
Streets Blue Ribbon Extra Creamy (A)	72	70	75	858	10.6 ▲	7.5 ■	19.0 ■	0.33
Connoisseur Gourmet Ice Cream Classic Vanilla	70	68	75	1030	14.7 ▲	9.5 ■	19.5 ■	0.90
Homer Hudson Vanilla Nirvana	70	70	75	1110	17.4 ▲	11.1 ■	20.4 ■	1.55
IGA Rich and Creamy Vanilla (A)	70	70	70	882	12.1 ▲	7.9 ■	20.1 ■	0.26
Peters Light and Creamy French Vanilla	69	67	71	655	2.7 ●	1.6 ▲	20.3 ■	0.37
Bulla Creamy Classics Premium Quality	62	63	68	859	11.4 ▲	7.6 ■	20.0 ■	0.36
Peters Original Vanilla	62	61	67	750	6.4 ▲	3.9 ▲	21.7 ■	0.28
Bulla Light 98% Fat Free Vanilla	61	63	65	515	1.6 ●	1.0 ●	17.1 ■	0.31
Coles Finest Madagascan Vanilla Bean	61	62	64	1080	18.4 ▲	12.2 ■	14.7 ▲	1.40
Black & Gold Vanilla Flavoured Ice Cream	60	57	65	831	10.8 ▲	7.3 ■	20.1 ■	0.16
Cadbury Creamy Vanilla	60	62	63	862	11.4 ▲	7.6 ■	19.9 ■	0.34
Coles 97% Fat Free (A)	60	61	59	694	3.0 ●	2.0 ▲	20.9 ■	0.26
New Zealand Natural Classic Vanilla	60	59	64	945	13.0 ▲	8.8 ■	20.7 ■	1.00
Peters Light and Creamy Classic Vanilla	60	56	68	655	2.7 ●	1.6 ▲	20.3 ■	0.37
Bulla Light Creamy Classics Premium Reduced Fat	59	60	59	690	5.6 ▲	3.6 ▲	19.4 ■	0.30
Golden North Traditional Country Ice Cream	59	61	62	831	10.8 ▲	7.3 ■	20.1 ■	0.24
Milfina (Aldi) Vanilla Ice Cream	59	62	60	844	10.4 ▲	6.8 ■	14.3 ▲	0.11
Bulla Real Dairy Ice Cream	58	58	57	819	10.2 ▲	6.6 ■	22.1 ■	0.31
Streets Blue Ribbon Light Vanilla (A)	56	55	61	682	2.7 ●	2.0 ▲	20.6 ■	0.33
Peters No Sugar Added Classic Vanilla 97% Fat Free	55	55	62	515	2.7 ●	1.6 ▲	9.5 ▲	0.50
Cadbury Light Vanilla	53	54	60	661	2.5 ●	1.7 ▲	25.8 ■	0.34
Coles Reduced Fat Vanilla Ice Cream (A)	53	53	57	738	6.6 ▲	4.6 ▲	21.3 ■	0.21
Weight Watchers French Vanilla 99% Fat Free	50	52	54	575	1.0 ●	0.7 ●	23.0 ■	1.10
Coles Smart Buy Vanilla (Ice Confection)	48	47	60	869	10.3 ▲	5.5 ■	17.2 ■	0.11
Milfina (Aldi) Vanilla Reduced Fat	48	48	53	762	6.8 ▲	4.8 ▲	24.7 ■	0.11
Coles Vanilla Ice Cream	47	48	48	822	10.5 ▲	7.4 ■	20.0 ■	0.21
Sanitarium So Good Vanilla Bliss 97% Fat Free (Soy)	46	44	57	630	2.9 ●	0.7 ●	16.2 ■	0.55
Milfina (Aldi) Vanilla Ice Cream Light (B)	44	48	49	662	2.5 ●	1.8 ▲	17.3 ■	0.11
Sara Lee French Vanilla	44	45	59	688	10.7 ▲	7.2 ■	14.6 ▲	0.84
Woolworths Home Brand Vanilla Ice Cream	39	34	53	849	10.5 ▲	6.4 ■	16.1 ■	0.11

USING THE TABLE

Nutrients are based on information provided on the label. **Traffic light criteria** are based on the latest nutrition recommendations and dietary guidelines established by government health experts in Australia and internationally. **Fat** (g/100g) ● ≤3; ▲ 3.1-19.9; **Saturated fat** (g/100g) ● ≤1.5; ▲ 1.6-4.9; ■ ≥ 5. **Sugars** (g/100g) ▲ 5.1-14.9; ■ ≥ 15. **Sodium** All ice-creams are less than 100mg/100g for sodium and get the green light. **Price per 100mL** is based on prices paid in Sydney supermarkets on 13 December 2010. **TABLE NOTES (A)** Contains gelatine as a stabiliser. **(B)** There were only 29 responses for this sample, so figures here are not as directly comparable with others.

NUMBER CRUNCH

-25°C

The ideal storage temperature for ice-cream; it should never be stored any warmer than -18°C. Avoid heat shock (large or long periods of temperature fluctuations), as this will cause large ice crystals to form.

DID YOU KNOW?

What's in the tub?

Each ingredient used to make ice-cream plays a role in providing flavour, consistency and texture.

Milk fat can be added as cream, butter or pure milk fat, and gives ice-cream its characteristic smoothness and creaminess. Generally, the higher the milk fat content, the richer the ice-cream. Coles Finest Madagascan Vanilla Bean has 18% milk fat – the highest of the lot – and therefore the highest percentage of saturated fat.

Non-fat milk solids include ingredients such as the solids of skim milk, protein, milk sugar (lactose) and mineral matter. They give body to the ice-cream and help develop smoothness. They do very little to enhance flavour, but work to increase viscosity and resistance to melting as well as lowering the freezing point. It's important that ice-cream not have too many non-fat milk solids, as these cause an icy texture due to the formation of lactose crystals.

Sweetening agents enhance the flavour of ice-cream; common sweeteners are cane sugar (sucrose) and glucose syrups. Sugar lowers the freezing point of the ice-cream mixture, resulting in slower freezing and so requiring a lower temperature for proper handling. Peters No Sugar Added Classic Vanilla has the lowest sugar content of all the ice-creams on test and instead uses the sweeteners acesulphame potassium (950) and sucralose (955).

Stabilisers such as vegetable gums increase the viscosity of ice-cream by controlling the size and growth of ice crystals to give a uniform and smooth consistency. Common stabilisers used include vegetable gums such as carrageenan (407); processed eucheuma seaweed (407a); sodium alginate (401); locust bean gum (410); guar gum (412) and xanthan gum (415), as well as powdered cellulose (460) and sodium carboxymethylcellulose (466). Gelatine can also be used, and is found in six of the ice-creams on test (see Table Notes, page 15).

Emulsifiers improve the whipping qualities of the mix by ensuring the milk fat remains evenly distributed. Commonly used emulsifiers include mono- and di-glycerides of fatty acids (471), citric and fatty acid esters of glycerol (472c), polysorbate 80 (433) and propylene glycerol esters of fatty acids (477).

Air (overrun) gives ice-cream its desired texture. Without it, the ice-cream mix would freeze as a solid mass. During the freezing process, the overrun increases its volume.

Colourings make ice-cream attractive to the eye and correspond to the associated flavour. For the ice-creams on test, the natural colouring annatto (160b) is mostly used. Caramel I (150a) and Caramel IV (150d) are also used in some.

Flavourings Manufacturers don't need to specify the names of the flavourings used in their ice-creams or whether or not they're natural. Natural vanilla extract is expensive, so less-expensive ice-creams tend to use artificial flavours. Sara Lee, New Zealand Natural, Homer Hudson, Coles 97% Fat Free and Coles Classic Vanilla Creamy claim to use a natural vanilla flavour. Coles Finest, Weis and Homer Hudson specify a percentage of vanilla extract that they use.

HOW WE ANALYSE

Taste test CHOICE asked 60 members to take part in an in-house blind taste test. This group was split into two sessions, each of which tasted 11 samples of ice-cream. The remaining samples were tasted by CHOICE staff. We selected vanilla-flavoured ice-creams available from supermarkets, and presented a scoop to each taster in a plastic container with no brand identification. Tasters were asked to consider the taste, flavour and overall acceptability of each ice-cream using a scale of 1-7 (very poor to excellent) and whether or not they would buy it.
Nutritional analysis We record the energy, total fat, saturated fat, sugar and sodium content of each ice-cream, taken from the nutritional information panel on the packaging.

WHAT'S HAPPENED TO HOME BRAND?

Woolworths Home Brand Vanilla ice-cream ranked highest in our test of private label and premium brands (see *CHOICE*, October 2010, page 14), with tasters praising its creamy taste and smooth texture. This time, however, it came last. Woolworths told CHOICE that although there had not been a formulation change, a batch had reached the shelves that didn't meet Woolworth's quality standards, which we may have used in this test.

We asked a handful of staff to taste the ice-cream from the tested batch as well as a new one; all said the ice-cream from the new batch tasted noticeably better. We can only conclude that better quality control should be practised, and any batch that's not up to standard in the test kitchen shouldn't be rolled out to consumers.

STORY HANNAH GREW

Eco yarn

Can you really trust those green claims on your next item of clothing or pair of shoes?

NUTSHELL

>> Eco-fibres and apparel can be beneficial to the environment in some part of their life cycle, but not across their entire life cycle.
>> Manufacturers need to provide clear and credible information so consumers can make informed choices that suit their needs and values.
>> The greatest consumption of energy and water in a garment's life cycle occurs in product-care; use cold water and biodegradable detergent, and line-dry your clothes where possible.

Many Australians rate sustainability as one of the most important issues facing the nation; we feel there is a real need for more sustainable products but are only willing to pay a small premium for them. Although slower to embrace consumers' desire for more ethical and sustainable products, the textile, clothing and footwear industries are catching up on the ethical fashion trend .

The environmental footprint of textile manufacture is huge. On top of energy and water consumption, toxic gases are released and up to 200 tonnes of water polluted per tonne of processed fabric . Increased global awareness about rural poverty, climate change and sustainability has also increased consumers' interest in the origin and manufacturing process of textile products. CHOICE highlights some common traps to avoid when you're next eco-fashion shopping.

'Eco'-fibres

Most people think of "natural" fibres, such as hemp, silk, wool, cotton amd bamboo, as environmentally friendly or sustainable options. Cotton and wool are considered the "eco-fibres" of choice in Europe and the UK; Japan is big on organic cotton, while the US is embracing bamboo. But according to Keith Cowlishaw, Head of the School of Fashion and Textiles at RMIT University, some natural fibres, such as cotton and wool, require large amounts of land, water and energy to produce.

Cowlishaw believes that despite its fossil fuel-origins, polyester is in fact one of the most sustainable fibres. "Polyester is recyclable, little arable land is used and huge amounts of energy aren't consumed in its production."

Sustainable compromise

Although the key to buying sustainably is to consider the impacts of a product's entire life cycle, this is a near-impossible task for consumers armed with a plethora of environmental claims but little immediate, supporting information. Until Australian consumers are better informed about environmental claims, Cowlishaw says the greatest direct action consumers can take to help the environment is in apparel-care. "Washing full loads in cold water with a biodegradable washing detergent and line-drying will have the greatest impact on water and energy use in the life cycle of your clothes."

In 2009, Target introduced their "Think Climate" label, which shows customers can reduce their energy use by cold-washing and line-drying tagged products. While Target should be commended for their initiative, its potential positive impact is undermined by subsequent care instructions that state "warm machine wash".

Common green claims and greenwash

A report last year by US environmental marketing agency TerraChoice found that the number of home and family products with "greener" claims had increased by 73% >

DID YOU KNOW?

New and improved consumer law

The *Competition and Consumer Act 2010* – formerly the *Trade Practices Act 1974* – states that businesses must not mislead or deceive consumers, or make false or misleading representations. The Act applies to all representations a business makes to you about their products, whether it is in an ad, over the phone, on their website or on product packaging.

Recent amendments to the Act have provided the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) with new tools to enforce the law. As part of its investigations, the ACCC can issue substantiation notices requiring traders and suppliers to provide evidence that supports any claims they make, including green claims. The amendments have also provided the ACCC with new enforcement powers to protect consumers, including the ability to issue infringement notices.

Although there are signs that greenwashing has reduced, an astonishing 95% of "greener" products are still guilty of a greenwash sin

< since 2009. Although there are signs that greenwashing has reduced slightly, an astonishing 95% of "greener" products are still committing a greenwash sin (see opposite). CHOICE recommends treating the following claims with caution and looking for supporting information:

- **"Green", "environmentally friendly", "eco-friendly"**: Businesses should clearly and accurately explain why their products are "greener" or more environmentally "safe" or "friendly" than other similar products.
- **"Certified products"** are assessed against a mandatory or voluntary standard, which can relate to a product's quality, performance, composition and/or means of production. Certification is usually signalled by a symbol or logo on the product (see Common Certification Symbols, opposite).
- **"Carbon neutral"** claims can be made about greenhouse gas emissions associated with the manufacture of a product and how businesses have offset them.
- **"Recyclable"** and **"recycled"**: These claims (the mobius loop symbol) can be misleading if the product is not recyclable or if the facilities to recycle them are not available to you.
- **"Sustainable"**: All processes involved in a sustainable product must be able to be sustained indefinitely.

What CHOICE found

A recent visit to the underwear and baby sections of big department stores highlighted a lack of immediate, credible information available on labelling to assist consumers in their search for environmentally preferable products. Instead, most companies are relying on transferring brand-trust from their regular clothing to their eco-ranges. Our spot-check found mostly organic cotton and bamboo products from brands including Ambra "Ecostyle", Bubba Blue, Jockey, Red Robin, littlebamboo, Natures Purest, Mitchdowd "green" and Purebaby. Environmental claims for bamboo-derived products include "hypo-allergenic", "naturally antibacterial", "environmentally friendly", "sustainable fibre" and "pesticide free".

Bubba Blue's super-soft Jersey Wrap claims to be 10% bamboo, while only **Ambra** and **Jockey** label bamboo content as viscose bamboo.

Natures Purest provides information on organically grown, naturally coloured cotton – which is less than helpful, considering the boxed product is in fact a baby blanket claiming to be made from 100% reconstituted bamboo fibre.

The **Mitchdowd green** underwear range has swing-tags on its products that provide information on their selected fibres and the process behind their "carbon neutral underwear" claim.

Organic claims on **Ambra Ecostyle's** organic cotton socks, as well as others such as "allergy free", were poorly substantiated on almost all product packaging.

We found the **Purebaby** brand to be most consumer-

DID YOU KNOW?

Bamboozled by bamboo

The advantages of bamboo compared with other textile crops are its quick growth rate and ability to be grown with little or no pesticides, which lessens its environmental impact. Bamboo fabric is widely marketed as hypo-allergenic, having naturally antibacterial, deodorising and thermal control properties .

In 2009, the US Federal Trade Commission (FTC) concluded that only mechanically processed bamboo products can be advertised or labelled as bamboo; the soft "bamboo" fabrics on the market today are rayon, a generic term for a manmade fibre created from the cellulose in plants such as bamboo and known in Australia as viscose. According to the FTC, there's no evidence that rayon retains the antimicrobial properties of the bamboo plant, or that any traits of the original plant are left in the finished product.

Ben Wilson, of Australian clothing company Little Bamboo, says there's great debate as to what should determine labelling – the process or the plant of origin. He says although there are no bamboo-specific labelling requirements here, his company has chosen to re-label products to reference both bamboo and viscose and thereby avoid confusing consumers.

Bamboo-viscose is processed with harsh chemicals that are known for their hazardous air pollution. Some companies are now using the less-polluting "Lyocell" process for the manufacture of their bamboo products. Dane Totham, CEO of Mitchdowd, says they use this chemical manufacturing process as it's a closed-loop system, so 99.5% of the chemicals used during the processing are captured and recycled to be used again.

to the Global Organic Textile Standard (GOTS) and are part of the MADE-BY scheme, which support companies that use sustainable materials and work with manufacturers that have good working conditions (see right).

Question the claims

Before you buy any clothes claiming to be sustainable and/or environmentally friendly in any way, see if you can answer these questions. If the information isn't available on the product packaging, ask the retailer or manufacturer:

- Are there specific eco-claims relating to the product, or are "eco" or "green" merely part of the brand name?
- Is there evidence to support the environmental claims being made?
- For blended-fibre products, do claims relate to all or just a single fibre?
- Do the environmental claims refer to the entire product life cycle or just a stage? "Organically grown cotton", for example, doesn't mean the final product is certified organic.
- What standards/certification scheme are used – is the certification scheme reputable?
- Are both environmental and labour conditions considered?
- Do claims relate to emissions from the production of the product, emissions from the product's use or both? How are the offsets generated? ■

DID YOU KNOW?

Common certification symbols

Environmental standards and certification, or "eco-labels", began appearing in the 1980s to increase transparency and protect against greenwash in eco-products. Globally, many certifying bodies and standards exist that cover organic and eco-textiles. A selection of legitimate certification symbols is listed here; for more, log on to **www.choice.com.au/greenclothes**

Organic Certifiers

- Australian Certified Organic (ACO)

Eco-textile standards

- Oeko-Tex
- MADE-BY

Ethical Production and Fair Trade

- Ethical Clothing Australia (Aus)
- Fairtrade Labelling Organisation (FLO)

Optional Organic Textile Standards

- Global Organic Textile Standard (GOTS)

CONFIDENCE IN TEXTILES
Tested for harmful substances according to Oeko-Tex Standard 100
Test-No. 00-0000
Institute

ethical clothing AUSTRALIA

FAIRTRADE
Certified Cotton

GLOBAL ORGANIC TEXTILE STANDARD · GOTS ·

MADE-BY
Fashion with respect for people and planet

AUSTRALIAN CERTIFIED ORGANIC

SEVEN SINS OF GREENWASHING

Greenwash is when companies exaggerate the environmental friendliness of their products and policies. According to US greenwash experts, TerraChoice, the evolution of greenwashing has seen an increase in both the "sin of no proof" and the "sin of worshipping false label" over the past 12 months.

1. **Sin of the Hidden Trade-off** is committed by suggesting a product is "green" based on a very narrow set of features without considering other important environmental issues.
2. **Sin of No Proof** is committed by an environmental claim, such as "organic", that cannot be substantiated by easily accessible supporting information or a reliable third-party certification.
3. **Sin of Vagueness** is committed when a claim is so poorly defined or broad that it's likely to be misunderstood by the consumer. "All-natural" is one example; formaldehyde is naturally occurring yet is a toxic carcinogen commonly used in the textile finishing process.
4. **Sin of Irrelevance** is committed by making an environmental claim that may be truthful, but for the product for which it's made is unimportant or unhelpful. See Natures Purest example above under "What CHOICE Found".
5. **Sin of Lesser of Two Evils** is committed by claims that may be true within a product category, but risk distracting consumers from the greater environmental impacts of the category as a whole.
6. **Sin of Fibbing** is committed by making environmental claims that are simply not true. Consumer demand for easily accessible, credible information to verify environmental claims will help trap the sinners.
7. **Sin of Worshipping False Labels** is committed when a product, through words or images, gives the impression of third-party endorsement that doesn't exist. Familiarise yourself with legitimate eco-labels to avoid this trap.

STORY EMILY McCLUSKEY

Pillow talk

CHOICE members reveal the pillow types, brands and retailers that will guarantee you a good night's sleep.

NUTSHELL

>> Paying between $50 and $200 for your next pillow should guarantee a good purchase.
>> Understanding what type of sleeper you are will help you choose a pillow with the right profile and density for you.

Like mattresses, there is no one-size-fits-all pillow. A pillow should take into account your body size and typical sleeping habits and positions, as well as any aches and pains and even the type of mattress you have (see **www.choice.com.au/mattresses** for our recommended mattress brands and retailers). But with so many to choose from, ranging in price from $10 to more than $300, it's difficult to know which pillow is right for you or how much you really need to spend.

CHOICE surveyed our members to find out the best pillow brands and retailers (see How We Survey, below right).

Brands, types and price

Dunlopillo, a manufacturer of latex and memory foam pillows, topped our survey with an overall satisfaction score of 86% (see table, opposite). Downia, which produces feather and down pillows, ran a close second. More than nine out of 10 respondents who bought a Dunlopillo or Downia said they would buy that brand again. Interestingly, Dunlopillo finished third-last in our mattress survey, while Tempur, which topped mattresses, is less popular for pillows, though members who bought Tempur pillows are also likely to buy the brand again.

Members who bought latex pillows were more satisfied than those who purchased a polyester pillow. While polyester pillows are cheap, they tend to be very soft and lack good support for your head and neck. More than half of members who bought a Tontine pillow did so from their polyester range, which may account for their low satisfaction score.

Members who paid between $50-$200 were more satisfied than those who paid less than $50. Half the pillows in the higher price bracket were made from latex, and latex pillows scored higher than average for satisfaction. Members who tried their pillow before buying were more likely to be satisfied with their purchase. If you can't try out a pillow in-store, do what CHOICE member Debbie did and take one home. "When I bought the first pillow, I was told that if I left the plastic cover on, I could try it overnight and take it back if it wasn't what I wanted – which I did." Check with the retailer

DID YOU KNOW?

Buying a new pillow

According to ergonomist Mark Dohrmann, we all have a preferred "starting position" for sleep: on our backs, tummy or a preferred side. The problem is that most of us change our posture about every 90 minutes (or more frequently if sleep is light or disturbed). A pillow has to work efficiently in all these postures. Here are some guidelines that will help you pick out and maintain the right pillow:

- **Replace your pillow** as soon as it starts to wear out or you feel it isn't supporting your head and neck anymore. Most pillows will last between six months and two years, with foam and latex lasting slightly longer.
- **Fold your pillow in half.** If it springs back, it still has some life in it; if it stays folded, it's time for an upgrade.
- **A pillow should support your neck while cushioning your head** and keeping your spine in alignment.
- **Think about how you sleep.** A back-sleeper may prefer a lower-profile pillow, while a side-sleeper may prefer a higher-profile pillow. Tummy-sleepers usually prefer a thin pillow.
- **Plump, fluffy pillows don't provide core firmness** necessary to maintain necessary support.
- **The softer the pillow, the less potential support.** Luxury cars have the firmest seats.
- **A good pillow will not compensate for a poor mattress** – one that is saggy, too springy or lumpy.
- **Try before you buy.** If the retailer also sells mattresses, find one that is similar to your own and lie on it for at least 10 minutes. Try rolling into different positions to make sure it accommodates all your sleeping postures.

about its returns policy to see if this is possible; alternatively, consider buying from a shop that offers you the chance to try lots of pillows in-store on a mattress similar to your own.

Retailers

David Jones came out top for satisfaction, with the highest scores for both customer service and product range. "Other" came second, possibly due to pillows being bought at smaller specialist stores and chains, where advice on sleep health may be more readily available than generalist stores. Big W and Myer scored lower than average on customer service, while Target and Kmart scored low for both customer service and product range.

The right pillow for you

A good all-rounder: Foam (Dunlopillo, Dentons, Tempur)
Foam pillows can be made to measure, keep their shape for years and are hypo-allergenic, so they're a good option if you suffer from allergies or asthma. "Memory foam" pillows, made from NASA-designed visco-elastic polyurethane, mould to your body shape and relieve pressure on sensitive areas but may make it difficult to move about – an issue if you move around a lot in your sleep.

If you have a small frame and/or are a tummy-sleeper: Feather and down (Downia)
Feather and down pillows are usually made with a combination of the two – the more down, the more expensive. A higher percentage of down means a softer pillow that will last longer; they can also be fluffed and moulded into your desired shape. On the downside, they can be expensive and are a potential allergen.

If you have a larger build or like a firmer pillow: Latex (Dunlopillo)
Latex is a renewable and biodegradable product made from the sap of a rubber tree. Latex pillows tend to be durable and last for years before needing replacing; they're also hypo-allergenic. Latex comes in a variety of shapes, profiles and densities, so be sure to choose a latex pillow that suits your needs.

If you're on a budget and/or a tummy-sleeper: Polyester (Tontine)
A good-quality polyester pillow will provide comfort and support, but as they tend to form lumps and hollows quickly you'll need to replace them frequently. They flatten easily, so you may find them comfortable if you're a tummy-sleeper.

If you love natural fibres and/or sweat heavily: Cotton and wool
Cotton and wool pillows are soft and can be added on top of a firm pillow if more support is needed. Both fibres are breathable, which minimises the risk of sweat stains; cotton is also hypo-allergenic and easy to care for. ■

While cheap, polyester pillows tend to be very soft and lack good support for your head and neck

HOW WE SURVEY

Pillow brands More than 1000 CHOICE members who bought a pillow in the past five years:

- rated how satisfied they were with their pillow
- told us the main reason they purchased their particular brand
- identified what material their pillow was made from and how much they paid for it
- told us whether or not they would buy the same brand again
- rated their retailer on cost, product range and customer service
- specified if they tried out their pillow before buying.

PILLOW BRAND SATISFACTION

Brand (number of respondents)	Overall satisfaction (%)	Would probably buy again (%)	Main reason for purchasing brand	Price range ($)
Dunlopillo (153)	86	93	Comfort	120 – 160
Downia (32)	84	94	Comfort	20 – 250
Dentons (82)	81	87	Comfort	45 – 110
Tempur (36)	80	75	Comfort	169 – 299
Other (576)	78	81	Comfort	–
Tontine (201)	73	83	Comfort	12 – 130

USING THE TABLE **"Other"** includes all brands where the brand/category was unknown by respondent, or it did not meet minimum sample size requirements (30 or more respondents). **Price range** is based on recommended retail prices.

PILLOW RETAILER SATISFACTION

Retailer (number of respondents)	Average satisfaction score	Customer service score (%)	Product range score (%)	Cost score (%)
David Jones (88)	76	80	77	72
Other (533)	75	76	72	76
Harvey Norman (37)	72	73	75	68
Big W (67)	69	63	67	78
Myer (171)	69	66	71	69
Target (103)	67	62	63	77
Kmart (81)	65	57	61	78

USING THE TABLE Online stores were excluded due to insufficient sample size. **"Other"** includes all retailers with fewer than 30 responses. **Average satisfaction score** is an average of customer service, product range and cost scores.

STORY EMILY McCLUSKEY

Checking out high-tech shopping

CHOICE takes a closer look at the high-tech devices in supermarkets now, and those on the way, to see whether they're revolutionising shopping or just providing another source of frustration.

NUTSHELL

>> Self-service checkouts and "Tap N Go" card readers are undeniably convenient, but both have their risks and limitations.

>> VIP Trolleys and smartphone barcode scanning technologies are on the rise and likely to be the future of shopping.

Imagine stepping into a supermarket where your trolley tallies your items as you put them in the basket, shows you where everything is and tells you the weekly specials. You use your smartphone to scan barcodes for price comparisons and product information – its camera even warns you that the chicken you're about to buy will give you food poisoning. You finish at a self-serve checkout, bag your items and simply tap a scanner with your credit card to pay, without needing to sign anything or key in a PIN.

All this technology – and more – could become reality very soon; in fact, in some stores it's already happening. CHOICE decided to check out what is in common use now and what is in development to get an insight into the future of supermarket shopping.

Self-service checkouts

What are they?

Introduced to Australia in 2003, self-service checkouts allow you to scan, bag and pay for items unassisted (theoretically, at least). Many consumers will be familiar with self-service checkouts, which already exist in some Coles, Big W, Woolworths and Kmart stores and are increasingly being installed as part of store refurbishments. Coles has already installed self-service checkouts in more than 90 stores and plans to roll them out to a third of all its stores over the next two years. Woolworths declined to speak with us.

The good and the bad

We surveyed 31 CHOICE staff members to get their opinions on self-service checkouts; overall, there were mixed feelings about the technology. Of the 31 staff members, 17 prefer to use a regular checkout, arguing it's less complicated and more reliable and convenient. Some also expressed concern about self-service checkouts taking people's jobs; however, Coles claims any displaced employees are redeployed elsewhere in the store. Of the remaining staff, 10 have no preference either way, with only four preferring self-service.

Despite most of our staff members preferring to use regular checkouts, they're prepared to use self-service if the queues are shorter and they only have a small number of items. However, there were some definite frustrations. One staff member said that "owing to complications with bagging technology and difficulties finding fruit and vegetable items on the touchscreen, the process often seems slower and less convenient than a regular checkout". Similarly, others commented on scales in the bagging area not being sensitive enough. Most needed assistance from an attendant at least once, and almost half have had difficulty getting their attention. Overall, however, CHOICE staff find self-service checkouts easy to use.

To get a fresh perspective on the technology, we also sent four self-service "virgins" shopping in Coles and Woolworths stores, with a standard shopping list (see above) and clear instructions that they were to use the self-service checkout. Only one said they would use self-service again, while two said "maybe" and one a definite "no". All four participants found the system very easy to use and the interface self-explanatory, and all found locating and scanning the shopping-list items pretty easy, except for the small, single red chilli – two participants had to seek assistance when the bagging area didn't recognise the small item. Two also commented that they prefer the Coles interface over Woolworths'.

CHOICE shopping list for our self-service "virgins".

The verdict

None of our 31 staff members could contemplate going through a self-service checkout with a full trolley of groceries. Although they offer consumers with fewer items a welcome alternative to long queues, they won't be taking over regular checkouts anytime soon. Look out for one coming to a supermarket near you.

'Tap & Go'

What is it?

"Tap & Go" card readers are increasingly popping up in petrol stations, newsagents, chemists, takeaways and, more recently, Bunnings and Dymocks. The technology allows customers to hold their credit or debit card within three centimetres of the reader and immediately pay for items costing less than $100, without needing to sign or enter a PIN. Not all cards have this capability; those that do have the relevant logo on the front (see below). Visa cardholders will find a payWave logo, while MasterCard uses the PayPass system.

The good and the bad

While this technology is certainly convenient, some customers are concerned about security. But financial institutions stress there is no greater risk in using these cards than standard credit or debit cards. "Contactless is safer than carrying cash – if you lose cash or it is stolen there is no way to recover it, whereas most people will return a lost card," says Adam Welch, Commonwealth Bank associate media advisor. Welch also cites a zero liability policy, whereby customers aren't liable for any unauthorised transactions (provided they meet certain guidelines), and argues that because the card doesn't leave your hand, you're less likely to lose it or leave it behind, or be vulnerable to fraud through card-skimming.

But what is stopping thieves from making many small purchases using the technology? Welch says the low-dollar limit deters thieves as they cannot buy big-ticket items such as TVs, and the more purchases they make the more likely they are to get caught.

The verdict

While this technology makes transactions faster and may reduce queuing time, the consumer loses their right to choose – once you have a card with this capability, you cannot turn it off (as you can global roaming on a mobile phone) to prevent misuse. The technology is not yet in supermarkets, but Coles plans to speed up smaller EFTPOS transactions and is considering prioritising this card technology. CHOICE expects Coles to keep consumer security concerns front of mind in any decisions it makes.

VIP Trolleys

What are they?

The VIP Trolley – a trolley that knows what you want and directs you around the supermarket – is currently being trialled in some IGA stores in the ACT and Victoria. Created by MediaCart and being introduced into Australia by VIP Retail, the trolley is rigged with a computer, screen and GPS navigation. It scans items as you put them in the basket, tallies the total cost and directs you through the supermarket aisles to your items of choice – great news if you often find yourself lost or are shopping to a budget (see our story on the psychological tricks supermarkets use to make you spend more in *CHOICE*, April 2010, page 60).

The trolley can also load shopping lists and recipes and direct you to the items and ingredients. Want to know what's on special? The trolley will trigger an appropriate >

Although self-service checkouts are useful for consumers with fewer items, they won't be taking over regular checkouts anytime soon

Mobile barcode scanning technology has proven popular overseas, but as yet there's no price comparison app tailored to the Australian market

< advertisement on the screen as you enter an aisle, such as one for milk as you move into the dairy section. Ads will also come on-screen depending on your in-store behaviour and purchase history, creating very targeted marketing.

The good and the bad

While all the functions of the VIP Trolley could potentially be quite useful, some experts have concerns. Dr. Paul Harrison, Senior Lecturer in Consumer Behaviour and Marketing at Deakin University, argues the GPS tracking and the targeted advertising will "exploit your psychological state at the supermarket, while collecting data about your shopping behaviour". Supermarkets will be used "as a concept testing 'retail laboratory', with the data from your shopping activities being used to evaluate advertising effectiveness". He also suggests that the targeted advertising will play on the human mind's openness to suggestion when undertaking a low-involvement activity such as grocery shopping. "This technology has been trialled in the US, and has been very successful in boosting sales in particular brands." To read Dr Harrison's further insights, go to www.tribalinsight.com.

Exploitation aside, the technology would no doubt be expensive to incorporate into the supermarket – so would it come at a cost to the consumer? According to MediaCart, the US parent company, the cost of the technology is absorbed through the trolley's on-screen advertising revenue – so in theory it won't affect your hip pocket.

When will we see them?

VIP Retail are in discussions with Coles and Woolworths, according to general manager Nathan Dunn – but both companies are awaiting the end of the trial to make a decision. "It's true that we have had conversations with the company, but have made no commitments to have these trolleys at this time," says Alecia Batten, Coles' coordinator of corporate affairs. The trial should be completed early this year.

The verdict

CHOICE believes that adding value to the shopping experience through tracking running totals and knowing exactly what is in each aisle is of benefit to consumers, but we're concerned about the use of the data collected through the trolley GPS. Is it an example of better service for the consumer, or just another way big business can track what you buy for their own advantages?

Smartphone barcode scanning

What is it?

The potential of smartphones seems endless as more and more applications (apps) come online to help us organise our lives, entertain or provide information. Mobile barcode scanning technology has given rise to apps that allow you to scan barcodes to create shopping lists, get price comparisons and even check in to domestic airports.

Smartphone barcode scanning has really taken off overseas, especially in the US, UK and Japan. According to a new consumer adoption study from barcode technology provider Scanbuy, use of their barcode-scanning apps grew by more than 700% between January and July last year, with the US the most active market. The most popular use of the technology is for price comparisons, whereby you scan the barcode of a product and a list is generated of all comparable prices both in your local area stores and online.

As well as providing price comparisons, smartphone barcode scanning can also connect you to extra product information and tell you whether it contains certain allergens. There's even speculation you'll be able to use the technology to check whether a supermarket food contains dangerous levels of bacteria. (For this to work, the food packaging would have to be injected with a dye that allows you to see bacteria through your phone's camera.)

The good and the bad

It's hard to know at this stage what the good and bad points of smartphone barcode scanning may be, as it's very much in its infancy in Australia and many of the apps are overseas-based and don't have Australian products in their databases. The only app that currently lists a substantial number of Australian products is Scan2List, which allows you to scan barcodes to create and share shopping lists. The downside of the app is that you have to create an account to be able to use it – a requirement that deterred us from trialling it.

When will we see it?

You can use the Scan2List app right now, but we're yet to see a price comparison app tailored to the Australian market. Considering the increasing use of smartphones and how much the barcode scanning apps are taking off overseas, it's a technology that's likely to gain momentum here.

The verdict

This technology has great potential for consumers – specifically for price comparisons and obtaining extra product and sanitary information – provided it doesn't completely supplant on-pack information and disadvantage shoppers without a smartphone. Overall, this could take the legwork out of shopping, giving you up-to-date information at your fingertips. ■

NUTSHELL

>> Some weight-loss myths and misconceptions may undermine your weight-loss efforts or have no benefit at all.
>> You can enjoy occasional treats in conjunction with a reduced-kilojoule diet and exercise regime combining cardio and resistance training.

STORY KARINA BRAY

10 TOP WEIGHT-LOSS MYTHS

Is your "miracle" weight-loss strategy actually expanding your waistline? CHOICE separates the myths from the facts.

There are many falsehoods around weight loss that ultimately impede rather than help people in their goal to reach and maintain a healthy weight. CHOICE has heard from dietitians frustrated by the myths and misconceptions they encounter in their everyday work dealing with people who are trying to lose weight – misconceptions that can lead to people becoming malnourished due to restricting entire food groups; erroneously putting their faith in "magic" pills, foods or eating patterns with no evidence of effectiveness; indulging in ineffective strategies that won't help them lose weight; or losing weight rapidly but unhealthily and unsustainably.

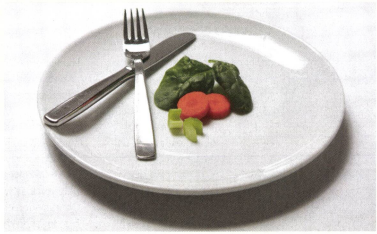
Here are 10 of the most common or problematic myths and misconceptions, as identified by our in-house experts and feedback from professionals working in the field, as well as some facts to set the record straight. >

1. The less you eat, the more weight you'll lose

The human body has evolved superbly to conserve as much energy as possible. So when starvation is apparent, your metabolism slows down to ensure vital processes can keep operating.

While skipping meals or cutting energy intake to extremely low levels – as with a detox program – may seem like a good weight-loss strategy, ultimately it will backfire as your body tries to conserve as much energy as possible. While you may appear to lose weight, much of this will be water. You'll also lose muscle tissue as your starving body clings to its precious fat reserves. Then, when you inevitably stop starving yourself, the body will quickly build up fat reserves in preparation for the next bout of starvation, the net result being that you'll have replaced muscle with fat. And because muscle burns more energy than fat, your metabolism will be slower and you'll gain more weight.

BOTTOM LINE: Reduce your daily kilojoule intake, but steer clear of skipping meals, detox and other drastic weight-loss regimes.



The bottom line for weight loss is ensuring you don't consume more energy than your body needs

2. Eating a big meal at night causes weight gain

Variations on this theme include "no carbohydrates after 3pm" and "no eating anything after 6pm". Intuitively, this sounds sensible – after all, you're not burning much energy while you sleep, so it's all piling on as fat, right?

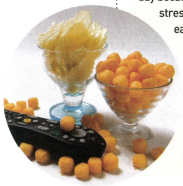
While it's true your digestion is slower at night, the net effect of the energy intake is much the same no matter when you eat – studies have repeatedly found that, all things being equal, it makes no difference whether you eat your largest meal at breakfast, lunch or dinner.

On the other hand, when you eat may affect how much and what you eat, which can lead to weight gain. Studies show that people who eat a good breakfast are less likely to be overweight than those who don't – breakfast-skippers may eat high-fat or high-sugar foods later in the morning. Also, if you eat well earlier in the day, you're likely to have more energy to be more active during your waking hours and ultimately burn more energy.

Other studies have found many overweight people overeat at night, and that nighttime meals and snacks are often fattier than other meals. Some people also gorge on junk food later in the day because they're tired and stressed – or just mindlessly eating while watching TV.

But any weight gain will be due to the excess kilojoules rather than the time of day.

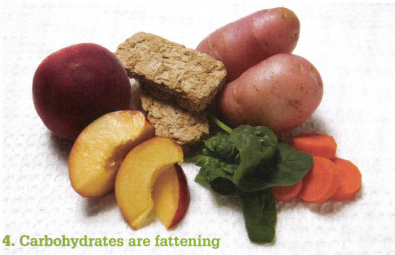
BOTTOM LINE: It's what you eat and how much that matters, not when.



3. Eating five or six small meals a day is better than eating three large meals

When adopting a healthier eating plan, many people find they get hungry if they're eating less than they're used to. One way around this is to eat several small meals instead of three larger meals. Eating more frequently helps keep hunger at bay, and also means you're less likely to overeat at mealtimes. Others prefer to eat decent-sized meals for breakfast, lunch and dinner, without snacking in between – which may be more social too. Either strategy is fine, so long as you don't skip meals or go for too long without eating, otherwise your metabolism will slow down.

BOTTOM LINE: It doesn't matter how many times a day you eat – just make sure you don't consume more energy than your body requires.



4. Carbohydrates are fattening

Not necessarily – although, like protein, fat and alcohol, they contain kilojoules and too much can cause weight gain. Carbohydrates include sugars and starches, and occur naturally in cereals, vegetables and fruits. They are your body's preferred source of energy, and the only source of energy for your brain. Highly refined carbohydrates such as sugar and white flour are found in lollies, biscuits, cakes, white bread and white pasta, and should be replaced with more nutritious options such as fruit and wholegrains.

Sticking only to carbohydrate foods with a low glycaemic index (GI) may help you lose weight, but isn't always the answer: some low-GI foods are high in fat as well as sugar, such as chocolate and cake (the fat slows down the absorption of sugar, which makes the GI rating low). By contrast, some high-GI foods such as rice, potatoes and watermelon are good for you.

Finally, the idea that you shouldn't combine protein and carbohydrates in meals is nonsense. There's no evidence this strategy has any weight-loss benefit beyond restricting your energy intake, and some foods (wholegrain and dairy, for example) contain both protein and carbohydrate, so in theory you'd have to avoid eating them and miss out on their valuable nutrients.

BOTTOM LINE: Carbohydrates are important in a balanced diet, and fruit, vegetables and wholegrain cereals are nutritious sources.

5. Fat is bad

Fat makes you feel satiated (full), and we need some fat in our diet for various body functions, including absorbing some nutrients. However, fat is very kilojoule-dense, and too much promotes weight gain.

Some fats are better than others. Monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats found in nuts, olive oil and avocado are good for you, while essential fatty acids found in fish, nuts and seeds are, as their name suggests, essential because your body can't produce them. By contrast, saturated and trans fats are not particularly good for you, and are linked to cardiovascular disease.

Choosing low-fat or reduced-fat processed foods such as ice-cream, pastry, biscuits or flavoured yoghurt won't necessarily help with weight loss, because the fat may be replaced with sugar for flavour. In fact, often they'll contain as many kilojoules as regular-fat products, so always compare the nutrition panels on the labels. However, many low-fat unsweetened dairy products such as milk and cheese contain as much or more protein and calcium as their full-fat counterparts, with less saturated fat and fewer kilojoules.

BOTTOM LINE: Cutting down on saturated and trans fats, while including small amounts of good fats in your diet, provides valuable nutrients, satiety and enjoyment of food.

6. Aerobic exercise is better than resistance training for weight loss

While you're actually doing it, aerobic exercise such as jogging tends to burn more energy than resistance training. It's great for cardiorespiratory fitness – that is, increasing your body's ability to use oxygen efficiently for energy, strength and endurance. However, resistance training also offers several weight-control benefits. Firstly, the muscle tissue damaged during resistance training requires a lot of energy to repair, so you'll burn kilojoules even when you're not exercising. Resistance training also results in greater muscle mass, which boosts your metabolism, as muscle burns more energy than fat. Importantly, it also prevents muscle tissue loss when you're restricting kilojoules – your body clings to fat as much as possible and will sacrifice protein from muscle tissue if it's not being used. Because muscle tissue needs time to repair, you can't train the same muscles every day, but aim to do some aerobic activity most days.

BOTTOM LINE: As you lose weight, combine aerobic activity and resistance training to burn energy while maintaining muscle mass.

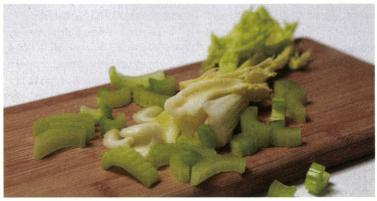
7. Celery has "negative calories" because it requires more energy to digest than it contains

Various foods – mostly fruits and vegetables – attract the claim that they are "negative calorie". And while it's true some require more energy to digest than others, none requires more energy than it contains.

This is due to the so-called "thermic effect", whereby eating food causes an increase in energy expenditure above your baseline metabolism due to digestion, absorption, and disposal of ingested nutrients. It's estimated that about 20%–35% of the energy in protein is used this way, while carbohydrate has a thermic effect of about 5%–15%. The thermic effect of fat is similar to or less than carbohydrate. But while the differences between food types might seem quite large, they are actually fairly insignificant in the context of your whole diet.

Other foods that supposedly help with weight loss due to metabolic effects include green tea, chilli and caffeine, but again the overall effect is insignificant. And don't believe the hype around foods that allegedly stop fat being absorbed, such as lemon juice or grapefruit.

BOTTOM LINE: There are no magic weight-loss foods or drinks. >



NUMBER CRUNCH

2500kJ

The amount of extra energy you'd need to burn per day to lose half a kilogram of fat in one week;

7km–9km

The amount of brisk walking you'd need to take to burn 2500kJ (or 6km–8km of jogging).

Simply replacing junk foods with energy-dense 'healthy' foods won't help weight loss – keep an eye on kilojoule content and portion sizes

8. You should cut out all treats because they're just empty calories

Cutting down on junk food is a great weight-loss strategy, especially if you eat a lot of it. But depriving yourself of pleasurable foods is often the downfall of weight-loss programs; when you don't have it, you may start to crave and therefore eat it even more.

Dr George Blair-West, a Queensland-based psychiatrist who specialises in the psychology of weight loss, recognises the importance of eating your favourite foods as part of a healthy, sustainable eating pattern. He suggests identifying a few "high-sacrifice" foods – the ones you'd really miss if you could never eat them again – and then eating a small amount of one such food slowly and mindfully in the morning, when you're less likely to binge or overeat.

BOTTOM LINE: Occasionally eating small amounts of your favourite treats has an important psychological advantage in weight control.

9. Just eat healthy foods and you'll lose weight

It's easy to overeat tasty treats that are high in fat and/or sugar, such as ice-cream, chocolate, pizza and chips. But simply replacing them with vast amounts of energy-dense healthy foods – such as muesli, dried fruit, nuts and dairy foods – may not result in weight loss.

Then there are foods that have a reputation for being healthy, such as salad, which can be a great source of fresh vegetables and, with a little added olive oil, healthy fats. However, adding excessive oil, fatty dressing, croutons, hard cheese or fatty meats won't help with weight loss. A healthy-sounding McDonald's Crispy Chicken Caesar Salad with dressing, for example, has almost as many kilojoules as a Big Mac.

Fruit juice is another major trap; dietitians tell CHOICE that many people don't realise a large, freshly prepared juice may contain 1000kJ – as many as in three or four pieces of fruit – yet without the fibre found in fruit it is not as filling, so they keep drinking it. Many people also don't realise that while juice contains more nutrients than fizzy drinks or beer, its energy content is similar.

BOTTOM LINE: Keep a food diary noting what you're eating, how much and how often.

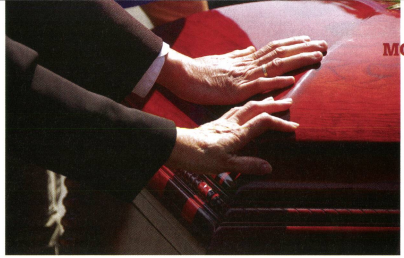
DON'T FORGET TO GET SOME ZZZZS!

Studies find that the less people sleep, the more likely they are to be overweight. People who don't get enough sleep on a regular basis have been found to have high levels of a hormone called ghrelin (which causes hunger) and low levels of a hormone called leptin (which suppresses hunger while increasing energy expenditure). This causes overeating and a preference for high-calorie foods. People who sleep five hours a night are more likely to become obese compared with those who sleep seven to eight hours.

10. You don't have to cut down on food to lose weight – just exercise more

It's surprisingly difficult (though not impossible) to lose a significant amount of weight simply by exercising more. To lose half a kilogram of fat per week, you'd need to burn an extra 2500kJ per day – about 7km-9km of brisk walking or 6km-8km jogging. Such exertion may make you tired for the rest of the day or sleep longer at night, and may make you hungrier, so you'll offset some of your good work by eating or resting more than usual. The best way to lose weight is to simultaneously reduce kilojoule intake from food and increase activity to maintain muscle mass and burn energy.

BOTTOM LINE: To lose weight, you need a combination of healthy eating and physical activity – in short, eat less and exercise more. ■



STORY UTA MIHM

Final payment

Is funeral insurance the best way to protect your family against financial hardship during a difficult time?

NUTSHELL

>> Under some funeral insurance plans, you'll end up paying more in premiums than the value of the cover.

>> Prepaid funerals, funeral bonds and life insurance can be more cost-effective options for covering your funeral expenses.

Funeral insurance and other prepaid funeral plans are regularly spruiked on TV. Ensuring your family does not suffer a financial burden in the case of your death is of course a wise move, but the National Information Centre on Retirement Investments (NICRI) warns consumers to be very careful before signing up to any of these products. According to actuaries Rice Warner, taking out funeral insurance at age 65 could mean your premiums almost add up to the costs of four funerals if you live until 91 (see Funeral Insurance Costs, right).

Covering your costs

There are a number of ways to cover funeral expenses:

Prepaid funerals You pay for all or part of a funeral, usually at today's prices, and it's covered when you die regardless of how much it would cost at that time. There are a few ways to fund prepaid funerals:

- *Small contributory funds:* You make small, regular payments for part or all of a funeral service with a particular director. Conditions vary between funds.
- *Pre-purchased products:* You pay for a cemetery plot, wall niche or place in a memorial garden, usually directly from the cemetery or crematorium.
- *Prepaid funeral plans:* You choose your preferred type of funeral and pay for it in full or make a deposit and pay instalments over a fixed period. Only some plans offer a refund if you cancel – always check before committing.

Funeral bonds are usually offered by friendly societies or life insurance companies, and require you to make a lump sum payment or pay by instalments. The money is invested and can only be used to cover your funeral – it can't be accessed earlier or for any other reason. The bond can be in your name or joint names, in which case the benefit is normally paid on the death of the first joint owner.

Funeral insurance You pay a regular contribution until age 90, after which time cover continues for free. The benefit amount is either fixed or increases over time, and you're usually only covered for accidental death for the first couple of years. An age limit of between 18 and 79 years usually applies for taking out cover – the older you are, the higher the premium. Premiums can be fixed or increase each year, and can vary according to your gender and whether or not you smoke. If premiums are not fixed, you won't know how much they increase in subsequent years. If you stop paying your premium, you'll no longer be covered and in most cases won't receive a refund.

Premiums vary considerably. In one example NICRI calculated in November last year, monthly premiums between providers range from $72 to $120 for a cover amount of $15,000 for a 65-year-old non-smoking male.

Life insurance can be taken out as a standalone policy or through your super fund. The cover amount is usually more than $100,000 and covers your dependants as well as your funeral costs. For more, see Life Support, *CHOICE* March 2010, page 37.

You can also log on to **www.choice.com.au/funerals** for our full report on funeral costs. ■

NUMBER CRUNCH

$45,528

The amount paid in premiums over and above funeral costs if you take out funeral insurance at age 65 and die aged 91.

CASE STUDY

Funeral insurance costs

Peter, aged 65, takes out funeral insurance. At age 76, the premium he has paid is similar to the amount of cover he receives, but from age 78 the premiums start to add up to substantially more than the funeral benefit. By comparison, if Peter pays a lump sum today of $6000 for a prepaid funeral, he can lock in the cost of his funeral at today's prices regardless of the time of his death.

FUNERAL INSURANCE: PREMIUMS VS BENEFITS

Age at death	Total premiums paid ($)	Benefit ($)	Difference ($)
66	493	6000	5507
71	3830	7658	3828
76	9566	9773	207
81	20,317	12,474	-7843
86	40,976	15,920	-25,056
91	64,879	19,351	-45,528

USING THE TABLE Source: Rice Warner actuaries, based on Insurance-Line Funeral Plan insurance, September 2010. Premiums cease at age 90.

ISTOCK PHOTO

NUTSHELL

>> CHOICE analysed 166 breakfast cereals for nutrition, focusing on fibre, sugar, salt and saturated fat.

>> Many supposedly "healthy" high-fibre breakfast cereals contain far too much sugar or salt (or both).

STORY REBECCA GATTO

Wake-up call for cereals

Some breakfast cereals marketed as "healthy" are anything but. CHOICE serves up your most nutritious options.

Many ready-to-eat breakfast cereals, especially those marketed to children, contain alarming levels of sugar – so much so that they really belong in the confectionery aisle. Yet often their manufacturers hide behind health claims that mask their cereals' serious nutritional shortcomings.

CHOICE analysed 166 breakfast cereals from the major supermarkets for their nutritional value. The good news is that a few more cereals have made the very high-fibre category since our 2009 review (see table, page 32); what hasn't changed, however, is the fact that too many cereals contain far too much sugar and salt.

What makes a healthy breakfast cereal?

The best ready-to-eat breakfast cereal is one that is high in fibre while also not too high in saturated fat, sugar or salt. But beware of enticing terms such as "wholegrains", "antioxidants" and "added vitamins and minerals"; examine the nutrition information panel and you'll see that, in many cases, this spin disguises a cereal that contains too much sugar, salt or both, and is too low in fibre to be considered healthy.

Putting the traffic light system (green, amber and red to denote low, moderate and high levels, respectively, of key nutrients) into practice is handy when it comes to reading the nutritional information panel. See our online article (**www.choice.com.au/breakfastcereals**) for a traffic-light printout that you can use when you're out shopping.

• **HIGH DIETARY FIBRE** helps maintain a healthy digestive system and decrease the risk of bowel cancer. In countries with diets high in fibre and wholegrains, diseases such as bowel cancer, diabetes and coronary heart disease are less common.

On average, Australians consume 18g-25g of fibre daily. Health authorities recommend that women consume 25g of fibre each day and 30g for men. (Children have lower fibre requirements – see our online article.) Choosing one of the very high- or high-fibre breakfast cereals will set you on your way to meeting your daily fibre needs. The cereals in the tables on page 32 and 33 are ranked by dietary fibre – only those with very high or high fibre are listed, as we believe they're the best choices for a healthy breakfast cereal. Kellogg's is the manufacturer with the greatest market share, but unfortunately 14 of its 28 products are low in fibre.

• **LOW SATURATED FAT** This isn't a major issue with most breakfast cereals. Nuts and seeds contribute most of the fat in breakfast cereals, but this is largely of the healthy, polyunsaturated form. Only two breakfast cereals get a red light for saturated fat: GoldenVale (Aldi) Healthy Starts Fruit 'n Nut and Barnhouse Mr Reen's Krunchy Cranberry Kirsch Original. The former contains coconut, linseed, almonds and hazelnuts, which also contribute healthier polyunsaturated fats, while the latter lists palm fat as its third ingredient.

To be eligible for the Heart Foundation Tick, a breakfast cereal must contain (among other criteria) no more than 1.5g per 100g of saturated fat. However, as CHOICE has previously discovered, the Tick won't necessarily guarantee you're choosing the best product (see *CHOICE*, March 2010, page 16). Manufacturers pay to participate in the program and, interestingly, in our review of the 28 products with the Tick, 27 are made by market leaders Kellogg's and Uncle Tobys (Vogel's Ultra Bran Soy

& Linseed also has the Tick), whereas other cereals, such as market leader Sanitarium Weet-Bix and Uncle Toby's Shredded Wheat, appear to meet the Tick criteria but don't carry a Tick. Using the nutrition information panel is the best way to compare fat content.

• **LOW SUGAR** Sugars add flavour, colour, aroma and texture to breakfast cereals. Unfortunately, more than half of the cereals we analysed have too much sugar (more than 15g per 100g) and earn a red light. Bear in mind, however, that for some breakfast cereals, the high sugar content comes from fruit. Check where fruit or sugars sit in the ingredients list to see whether the sugar is coming from added sugar, e.g. "glucose syrup", or natural sugars in fruit; avoid cereals that are high in added sugars, and if you need something a little sweet, choose one that contains fruit such as sultanas and dried apricot.

• **LOW SODIUM (SALT)** Sodium is linked to high blood pressure and an increased risk of heart disease. About 75% of the sodium we eat comes from salt used in processed foods. The suggested dietary target for sodium is 1600mg per day (or 4g of salt), although we need much less than this (460mg-960mg) to meet our body's sodium requirements. On average, Australians consume 2150mg of sodium a day.

There's no need for high levels of salt in breakfast cereals, yet very few of the high-fibre cereals get the green light for sodium content. In March 2010, members of the federal government's Food and Health Dialogue, a collaboration of government, health groups and industry, joined forces to limit sodium intake. **Sanitarium, Kellogg's, Woolworths, Coles, Aldi** and **Cereal Partners Worldwide (Nestlé)** have committed to reducing sodium in products with more than 400mg of sodium per 100g by 15% over the next four years. CHOICE welcomes the initiative, but as breads and cereal products are among the biggest sources of sodium in our diet, we want the government to take tougher action and set mandatory targets across a broader range of food categories should these voluntary initiatives fail to deliver any meaningful reduction in sodium intake.

How healthy are your favourites?

Little has changed since our 2009 review. The Top 10 most popular breakfast cereals (based on figures from Retail World's *2009 Annual Report*) are still the same, without many nutritional improvements.

- **Sanitarium Weet-Bix** (19.8% of overall breakfast cereal volume). It's great that the stand-out market leader is one of the best all-round breakfast cereals. A high-fibre option, its only letdown is its moderate sodium content. The generic brand equivalents are also good, while Sanitarium Weet-Bix Kids is a low-sodium alternative (see below).
- **Kellogg's Sultana Bran** (4.4%) is a good family breakfast cereal. It's high in fibre, and although it is high in sugar, this is mainly derived from the sultanas. It also has a moderate amount of sodium.
- **Kellogg's All-Bran** (2.8%) is a very high-fibre option; however, it gets an amber light for sugar (due to its added sugars) and sodium. >

NUMBER CRUNCH

460mg-960mg
The minimum amount of sodium we need to meet our body's requirements per day;

785mg
The amount of sodium (per 100g) in Golden Vale Breakfast Bubbles (Aldi), the saltiest cereal we analysed (with 236mg per 30g serve).

WHAT TO BUY

The healthiest cereals

The following breakfast cereals stand out as the healthiest choices. They are high or very high in fibre and also receive green lights for fat, saturated fat, sugars and sodium. For some people, they may not be the tastiest cereals; however, adding a serve or two of fresh fruit or a dollop of low-fat yoghurt will boost the flavour and make your breakfast more nutritious.

Sanitarium Weet-Bix Lite

Abundant Earth Puffed Corn

Uncle Tobys Shredded Wheat

Sanitarium Weet-Bix Kids

USING THE TABLES
Nutrients are based on information on the label. **Fibre** The cereals are ranked by dietary fibre content, as you should be able to rely on cereal to make a big contribution to your daily fibre needs. **Very high** = at least 20% fibre (8g per 30g serve). **High** = 10%-19.9% fibre (3g-5.9g per 30g serve). **Moderate** = 5%-9.9% fibre (1.5g-2.9g in a 30g serve). **Low** = less than 5% fibre. **Traffic light criteria** are based on the latest nutrition recommendations and labelling guidelines established by government authorities in Australia and internationally. **Total fat** (g/100g) ● ≤3; ▲3.1-19.9; ■ ≥20. **Saturated fat** (g/100g) ● ≤1.5; ▲1.6-4.9; ■ ≥5. **Sugars** (g/100g) ● ≤5; ▲5.1-14.9; ■ ≥15. **Sodium** (mg/100g) ● ≤120; ▲121-599; ■ ≥600. The 🍃 symbol indicates that the sugar is largely sourced from fruit.
TABLE NOTES
(A) Contains preservative 220 (sulphur dioxide) and/or 223 (sulphur metabisulphite).
(B) Discontinued, but may be available in some stores.
Children's cereal.

Uncle Tobys Plus (7.1%) is a range of seven cereals with a variety of supposed added health benefits. They have a moderate amount of sodium, but are high in sugar. In most cases, the sugar is mainly from the dried fruit; however, according to the ingredients lists, Essentials for Women and Omega 3 Lift has more added sugar than fruit. Four of the seven are high-fibre options (see table, right), and are OK choices.

Kellogg's Just Right Original (4.4%) has a moderate amount of fibre, and sultanas and dried apricot pieces contribute to the high sugar content. The only thing saving this cereal from getting a thumbs down is its low sodium content – something that very few cereals achieve.

Kellogg's Nutri-Grain (6.4%), which is promoted as "ironman food", is among the worst breakfast cereals nutritionally and shouldn't be considered as an everyday option because it's low in fibre and high in sugar and sodium. Sugar is listed as the second ingredient.

Kellogg's Special K (3.8%), which is marketed as an integral part of a two-week healthy living and exercise plan, just scrapes through with amber lights for sugars and sodium. This, combined with its low fibre content – one 30g serve provides a mere 3% of a woman's daily fibre requirement – earn it a thumbs down.

Kellogg's Coco Pops (3.3%) is one of the most popular children's cereals but also one of the least nutritious – low in fibre and with one of the highest sugar contents. Previous advertisements boasted of Coco Pops' added vitamins and minerals; now, at least, Kellogg's doesn't pretend it is something it's not, marketing it as "just like a chocolate milkshake, only crunchy!"

Kellogg's Cornflakes (3.7%) These "light flakes of sun-ripened corn" supposedly "taste good and are good for you", but a few added vitamins and minerals and a moderate amount of sugar can't make up for this cereal's low fibre and very high sodium content.

Kellogg's Crunchy Nut Cornflakes (2.7%) is very high in sugar, moderately high in sodium and total fat and too low in fibre to be considered an everyday cereal.

CHOICE VERDICT

CHOICE wants tougher labelling laws that prevent manufacturers sugar-coating even the worst breakfast cereals with claims about nutrition content and health benefits that don't truly reflect how unhealthy they really are. A low-fibre cereal such as Kellogg's Nutri-Grain, for example, which is packed full of added sugars and high in salt, should not be able to claim that it has "protein for muscle development" and "calcium for strong bones". We also want a front-of-pack traffic light labelling system to be introduced across the food supply to help all consumers make healthy choices. ■

VERY HIGH-FIBRE BREAKFAST CEREALS

Product brand/name (in order of total dietary fibre; alphabetical where equal)	Serve size (g)	Total dietary fibre (g/100g)	Energy (kJ/100g)	Total fat (g/100g)	Saturated fat (g/100g)	Sugars (g/100g)	Sodium (mg/100g)
GoldenVale Just Bran (Aldi)	45	39.5	1300	4.7 ▲	1.1 ●	13.7 ▲	390 ▲
Uncle Tobys BranPlus	45	39.5	1300	4.7 ▲	1.1 ●	13.7 ▲	390 ▲
Coles Smart Buy Processed Wheat Bran	35	37.5	1360	4.0 ▲	<1 ●	12.5 ▲	382 ▲
Ecor Bran Sticks	30	33.0	1074	1.0 ●	0.3 ●	8.0 ▲	300 ▲
Coles Bran Start	30	31.9	1130	2.8 ●	0.9 ●	15.2 ■	323 ▲
Kellogg's All Bran Original	45	29.5	1370	3.0 ●	0.5 ●	13.6 ▲	380 ▲
Goodness Superfoods Protein 1st	45	29.4	1550	9.3 ▲	1.6▲	17.1 ■	49 ●
Woolworths Home Brand Processed Bran	35	28.9	1170	5.0 ▲	0.9 ●	16.4 ■	482 ▲
Vogel's Ultra Bran Soy & Linseed	45	28.1	1400	3.2 ▲	0.5 ●	13.0 ▲	310 ▲
Goodness Superfoods Digestive 1st	45	25.7	1500	6.4 ▲	1.2 ●	29.9 ■	56 ●
Uncle Tobys Vita Brits High Fibre Bites Brown Sugar & Cinnamon	30	21.4	1446	1.4 ●	0.3 ●	13.5 ▲	390 ▲
Kellogg's Guardian	30	21.2	1440	1.2 ●	0.3 ●	11.8 ▲	215 ▲
Uncle Tobys VitaBrits High Fibre Bites Honey	30	20.4	1455	1.4 ●	0.2 ●	17.9 ■	373 ▲

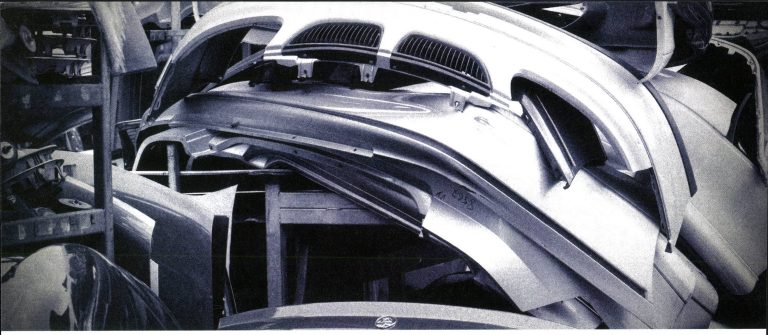
CHOICE ONLINE
For our complete nutritional breakdown of all 166 cereals, log on to **www.choice.com.au/breakfastcereals**, where you'll also learn how to decode all the advertising hype.

HIGH-FIBRE BREAKFAST CEREALS

Brand / product (in order of total dietary fibre; alphabetical where equal)	Serve size (g)	Total dietary fibre (g/100g)	Energy (kJ/100g)	Total fat (g/100g)	Saturated fat (g/100g)	Sugars (g/100g)	Sodium (mg/100g)
Kellogg's All-Bran Dual	40	19.9	1460	1.2 ●	0.2 ●	19.9 ■	305 ▲
Kellogg's All-Bran Wheat Flakes	40	19.2	1430	1.7 ●	0.5 ●	10.5 ▲	435 ▲
Sanitarium Weet-Bix Hi-Bran	40	18.3	1490	5.0 ▲	3.3 ▲	8.5 ▲	406 ▲
Kellogg's Special K Advantage	40	15.6	1480	0.6 ●	0.1 ●	16.1 ■	395 ▲
Uncle Tobys Plus Fibre Lift (A)	40	15.5	1431	1.9 ●	0.3 ●	26.0 ◆	125 ▲
# Kellogg's Sultana Bran	45	14.9	1410	1.7 ●	0.4 ●	22.7 ◆	270 ▲
Uncle Tobys Plus Sultanas 'n Bran (B)	40	14.9	1470	3.0 ●	1.5 ●	32.1 ◆	395 ▲
Sanitarium Fibre Life Bran & Oats with Berry	45	14.2	1520	5.0 ▲	1.2 ●	19.6 ■	281 ▲
Weight Watchers Flakes Bran, Apricot, Sultana	45	13.8	1510	2.0 ●	0.4 ●	34.1 ■	340 ▲
Uncle Tobys Healthwise for Digestive Wellbeing (A)	45	13.3	1550	3.8 ▲	0.8 ●	23.7 ◆	240 ▲
Abundant Earth Puffed Corn	14	13.2	1610	2.3 ●	<1 ●	1.0 ●	<5 ●
# Kellogg's Sultana Bran Buds	45	13.2	1430	1.5 ●	0.4 ●	25.1 ◆	135 ▲
Uncle Tobys Shredded Wheat	47	13.2	1490	1.2 ●	0.4 ●	2.0 ●	10 ●
Kellogg's Mini-Wheats Wholegrain 5 Grains	40	12.2	1510	1.6 ●	0.3 ●	8.8 ▲	5 ●
Sanitarium Weet-Bix Lite	30	12.2	1480	1.4 ●	0.3 ●	1.6 ●	20 ●
IGA Signature Wheat Flakes	30	12.0	1520	2.2 ●	1.1 ●	1.1 ●	400 ▲
Sanitarium Fibre Life Bran Flakes	35	12.0	1490	1.3 ●	0.2 ●	5.6 ▲	355 ▲
Uncle Tobys VitaBrits Weeties	30	12.0	1520	2.2 ●	1.1 ●	1.1 ●	400 ▲
Uncle Tobys VitaBrits	33.3	11.9	1510	2.2 ●	1.1 ●	1.1 ●	400 ▲
Coles Organic Wheat Biscuits	30	11.4	1480	1.5 ●	0.4 ●	2.3 ●	270 ▲
Coles Right Start Fruit & Fibre	45	11.3	1520	2.7 ●	0.6 ●	18.7 ■	220 ▲
Uncle Tobys Plus Sports Lift (A)	40	11.3	1470	1.7 ●	0.5 ●	23.8 ◆	281 ▲
Black & Gold Wheat Biscuits	30	11.0	1470	1.3 ●	<1 ●	2.8 ●	280 ▲
Coles Smart Buy Wheat Biscuits	31	11.0	1525	1.5 ●	0.3 ●	0.8 ●	385 ▲
IGA Signature Wheat Biscuits	30	11.0	1470	1.3 ●	0.3 ●	2.8 ●	280 ▲
Sanitarium Weet-Bix	30	11.0	1490	1.4 ●	0.3 ●	3.3 ●	290 ▲
# Sanitarium Weet-Bix Kids	30	11.0	1480	1.4 ●	0.3 ●	2.9 ●	110 ●
Sanitarium Weet-Bix Organic	30	11.0	1490	1.4 ●	0.3 ●	3.3 ●	290 ▲
# Coles Whole Wheat Biscuits	30	10.9	1590	1.5 ●	0.4 ●	2.7 ●	270 ▲
# Freedom Foods Cocoa Puffs	35	10.9	1530	1.7 ●	0.5 ●	21.2 ■	239 ▲
Uncle Tobys Health Wise for Heart Wellbeing (A)	45	10.9	1600	7.0 ▲	1.1 ●	30.1 ◆	300 ▲
Uncle Tobys Oat Brits	41.7	10.9	1570	6.1 ▲	1.5 ●	1.0 ●	295 ▲
Freedom Foods Corn Flakes	50	10.5	1610	3.6 ▲	0.6 ●	14.9 ▲	120 ●
GoldenVale Wheat Biscuits (Aldi)	31	10.5	1510	1.6 ●	0.4 ●	2.7 ●	270 ▲
Uncle Tobys Plus Muesli Flakes (A)	40	10.5	1508	2.1 ●	0.9 ●	24.2 ◆	285 ▲
Woolworths Home Brand Wheat Biscuits	31	10.5	1510	1.6 ●	0.4 ●	2.7 ●	270 ▲
Uncle Tobys Cheerios Honey and Oats	30	10.3	1590	4.2 ▲	1.2 ●	21.8 ■	370 ▲
# Freedom Foods Rice Puffs	35	10.2	1540	1.6 ●	0.4 ●	6.5 ▲	172 ▲
GoldenVale Healthy Start Fruit 'n Nut (A)	45	10.1	1720	15.0 ▲	6.2 ■	16.5 ■	195 ▲
Uncle Tobys Cheerios	30	10.1	1580	3.6 ▲	1.0 ●	17.8 ■	390 ▲
Nature's Path Organic Mesa Sunrise	30	10.0	1610	4.6 ▲	<1 ●	13 ▲	412 ▲

SULPHUR IN CEREALS?

The preservative sulphur dioxide (220), which can also be added in the form of sulphur metabisulphite (223), is typically used in cereals that contain dried fruits. While sulphur dioxide used in very low levels is safe for most people, it destroys vitamin B1 (thiamine) and can trigger asthma attacks. We found 18 breakfast cereals contain this preservative, all of which contain dried fruits. Seven Uncle Tobys cereals contain sulphur dioxide; its use is noted on the packaging as maintaining colour and shelf life.



NUTSHELL

>> CHOICE compares 30 insurance companies to identify the Best Buy policies in your state or territory for your driving scenario.

>> We found average savings of more than $450 for each scenario analysed – use our checklist to determine how much you can save while still getting the right cover.

STORY BRENDAN MAYS & CECILIA LEE

Slippery slope

Always review before you renew your car insurance – we explain why.

When you receive your car insurance renewal slip, it's tempting just to pay up and forget about it. You may have built up some discounts with your insurer, and besides, who has time to research quotes and check lengthy policy conditions? According to CHOICE's recent car insurance satisfaction survey (see page 7), more than half of our members didn't shop around when their slip arrived, and more than 70% have not switched insurers in the past five years.

However, considering the level of cover you receive can change from year to year, as well as increased competition lowering premiums, it's surprising that so many people stay put. There are some serious savings on offer, and in some cases, even your existing insurer may be harbouring a better deal than the one presented on your renewal notice.

Raw deal

Several CHOICE members have reported receiving and paying their automatic renewal slip, only to discover that their existing insurer is offering a better deal online. Insurance companies argue this can be related to various online discounts or marketing campaigns, but whatever the reasons for the price differences, they're leaving customers feeling disgruntled.

In most cases, a call to your insurer will see your renewal slip price reduced to match the online quote. However, one member told us their insurer refused to lower the price, claiming the cheaper quote was for new customers only. In this situation, you could cancel your existing policy and reapply to access the lower price, but why go to that trouble when the insurer isn't showing much interest in keeping your business?

CHOICE member Peter cut his insurance bill in half after switching providers. See Better Ways to Spend, page 38, for the potential savings we've found for each state and territory.

Quality coverage

Not surprisingly, car insurers with the highest policy features scores (see table, page 36) were often among those with the highest satisfaction survey scores. Insurers with good coverage (wide-ranging policies that protect you in a range of scenarios), competitive prices and high satisfaction are highlighted as Best Buys (see right).

Finding a competitive premium is important, but should not be your only concern when renewing your car insurance. You should also make sure you're getting good coverage for your money or it could end up costing you at claim time.

Honourable mentions

You don't need to spend more to guarantee better-quality coverage. **Apia**, for example, has the highest features score of all the insurers we looked at, a high satisfaction rating and some of the lowest premiums. The specialist over-50s insurer provides many additional benefits, including new car replacement if your car is stolen anytime within the first 10 years of its life.

Shannons, another specialist insurer, also performed well for price, customer satisfaction and features, including $0 windscreen excess as standard and a high level of cover across the board. Unfortunately, Shannons is also fairly restrictive in who they'll insure, catering primarily for car enthusiasts such as those requiring limited-use cover for classic or collectable cars. However, they may also insure drivers with a good record.

AAMI performed strongly in our survey, including for drivers who have made a claim but otherwise have a relatively good driving history. Three of the major banks, **ANZ**, **Westpac** and **St George**, are also among our Best Buys for certain states and scenarios, suggesting they're working hard to break into the market. **Suncorp** is another strong performer with competitive prices and policy features.

Room for improvement

NRMA, SGIO, SGIC, RACV, Allianz and Budget Direct will all increase your premium after a claim regardless of no claim bonus (NCB) protection. Budget Direct was often competitively priced but didn't score well for policy features, and this was also reflected in its satisfaction score. Much of the extra coverage that comes standard with our top-rated insurers is often either restricted or an optional extra. >

BEST BUY CAR INSURERS BY STATE/TERRITORY

Insurer	ACT	NSW	NT	Qld	SA	Tas	Vic	WA
YOUNG DRIVER								
ANZ		✓	✓				✓	
OnePath		✓	✓				✓	
QBE	✓			✓		✓		
St George						✓		✓
Suncorp			✓	✓	✓			✓
Westpac	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	
SINGLES / COUPLE								
AAMI	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Mutual Community					✓			
RAA					✓			
Shannons	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
St George	✓					✓	✓	✓
Suncorp				✓				
SINGLES / COUPLE WITH AT-FAULT ACCIDENT								
AAMI	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
RAA					✓			
St George	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Suncorp			✓	✓				✓
OLDER SINGLES / COUPLE								
AAMI		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Apia	✓	✓			✓		✓	✓
CGU						✓		
Shannons			✓					✓
St George	✓					✓		✓
Suncorp			✓	✓				

INSURANCE RENEWAL CHECKLIST

Use the following checklist to help ensure you obtain the best-value car insurance cover.

QUOTES

- ☑ **Get at least four quotes** from four different insurers.
- ☑ **Pay attention to the excess**, as this can heavily affect the quoted premium. In many cases, insurers have made the basic excess flexible.
- ☑ **Always check your own insurer's quote online** – never assume the premium quoted on your renewal notice is the best deal they can provide.

POLICIES

Always check an insurer's product disclosure statement (PDS) before signing up to a contract, even when you're renewing an existing policy. Here are some important things to look out for:

- ☑ **Theft, accident, hail, storm, flood, fire** and **malicious damage** should be included as standard, as should a **24-hour helpline**.
- ☑ **Are you getting agreed value for your vehicle?** CHOICE believes agreed value is of more benefit to the consumer than the commonly applied market value, as you know what you get in the event of a total damage claim.
- ☑ **Choice of repairer** should be standard but isn't always, and sometimes there are extra conditions.
- ☑ **Make sure there is adequate cover for personal property in the event of theft.** Check to see which items are included, such as mobile phones, clothes or laptops.
- ☒ **Watch out for costly additional excesses**, such as a young driver excess in the event of a claim.
- ☒ **New car replacement (in the event of total loss) conditions can be restrictive**. Make sure you're covered for at least two years with an adequate kilometre limit.
- ☒ **Conditions and limits for a replacement car after an incident (usually a rental car) can differ.** Often, a replacement car after an accident is an optional extra, but it is normally included after theft.
- ☒ **Most insurers only offer third-party cover for a replacement car**, but some will provide comprehensive cover. Be careful of any liabilities.
- ☒ **Some insurers charge more for monthly repayments**. If you choose to pay this way, make sure you're not paying extra.

CONFIRMATION

Once you've agreed on a new insurance contract, make sure you're clear about the date on which cover begins and any other conditions that may be applicable.

Once you've agreed on a new car insurance contract, make sure you're clear about the date on which coverage begins and any other conditions

An unlisted driver excess is a common additional excess for drivers not included on the policy

CAR INSURERS COMPARED		PERFORMANCE		FEATURES			
Fund / policy (in order of features score; alphabetical where equal)	**States / territories available**	**Features score (out of 100)**	**Satisfaction score (out of 100)***	**Agreed or market value**	**Free NCB protection (for those on maximum NCB rating)**	**Premium will not increase after claim when NCB protection applies**	**Personal property covered in case of theft ($)**
APIA	All	85	82	Either	√ (B)	√	1000
ANZ	All	79		Either		√	500
HBA	All except NT, SA	79		Either	√	√	500
Mutual Community	NT, SA	79		Either	√	√	500
RAA	SA, Broken Hill	79	87	Higher of the two	√	√	500
Shannons	All	78	83	Agreed	√ (B)	√	500
St George	All	78		Either	√ (C)	√	500
CGU	All	77	69	Either	√ (C)	√	500
Suncorp	All except Tas	77	71	Either		√	500 (E)
AAMI	All	76	75	Agreed			500 (F)
OnePath	All	76		Either		√	500
QBE	All except NT	75	74	Either		√	
GIO	NSW, ACT, Vic, NT, WA	73	74	Agreed		√	500 (E)
RACT	Tas	73		Agreed	√	√	500
Westpac	All	73		Either		√	750 (G)
HBF	WA	72		Agreed		√	500 (H)
CommInsure	All	71		Either		√	500 (H)
Ansvar	All	70		Market	√	√	500
TIO	NT	69		Market	√	√	300 (H)
The Buzz	All	66		Agreed	(D)		500
NRMA (ACT, NSW, Tas)	NSW, ACT, Tas	65	73	Either	√		
NRMA (Qld)	QLD	65	75	Either	√		
SGIC	SA	65		Either	√		
SGIO	WA	65		Either	√		
RACV	Vic (A)	63	76	Either			
Allianz SureCover Plus	All	62	74	Either			500
Australian Seniors	All	62		Agreed	(D)		500
Pay As You Drive	All	62		Agreed	(D)		500
Real	All	62		Agreed	(D)		500
Budget Direct Gold Comprehensive	All except NT	59	67	Either			500 (J)

USING THE TABLE All insurers surveyed offer new car replacement in case of total loss, but vehicle age limits apply and conditions can vary greatly. All insurers surveyed offer a 24-hour helpline except The Buzz, which currently operates its helpline from 7am-10pm (24-hour trial currently being tested in NSW only). Westpac has a 24-hour helpline, but not to arrange towing. **TABLE NOTES** * Scores derived from CHOICE member insurance satisfaction survey, August 2010. Mean scores shown. Only insurers who received 30 or more ratings were given a score. ** Additional terms and conditions may apply – check policy for details. **(A)** RACV also writes policies for residents of Victoria with assets in Queensland and NSW. **(B)** Protected free after three years. **(C)** Protected free after two years. **(D)** Insurer does not offer an NCB discount but instead builds discounts into the pricing structure.

BETTER BANKING – ONE BONE WE WON'T LET GO OF

We've been focusing on our Better Banking initiative for the past few months and have already been able to tick off a number of achievements, thanks to support from you, our members.

What have we achieved?

✓ Since October 2010 we've put the consumer voice at the heart of the national debate about banking – just as we promised

✓ In December, the government put "empowering consumers to get a better deal" at the top of its agenda for banking reform – and included proposals from CHOICE in its plans

✓ We launched the "Compare, Ditch and Switch" drive so you can find a better deal without waiting for the government's reforms. In its first month, 1500 people used the Compare, Ditch and Switch tool every day

What is still to come?

- We will keep up the pressure on banks to give customers a better deal
- We will deliver to the Senate's banking inquiry a new report on what needs to change in banking, based on the views of CHOICE members and supporters
- We will make sure the government carries on its reform agenda, with the needs of consumers front and centre

How can you help?

- Join the campaign and stay up to date by visiting **www.choice.com.au/betterbanking**
- Tell your friends and families about the campaign
- Find a better deal at **www. choice.com.au/ditch**

choice The People's Watchdog

STORY EMILY MCCLUSKEY

A 'healthy' dose of spin

For drinks that are essentially cordials with added vitamins, "nutrient-enhanced waters" are making a splash.

NUTSHELL

>> Since the introduction of Glacéau VitaminWater, "nutrient-enhanced waters" have become a booming industry.

>> They're nowhere near as healthy as their packaging and marketing would have you believe.

In 2008, CHOICE awarded a Shonky to Coca-Cola Amatil for its range of Glacéau "nutrient-enhanced water beverages". Despite marketing that asserts the drink's health benefits, Glacéau VitaminWater contains enough sugar to provide an average woman with about a third of her recommended intake.

But the shonkyness doesn't end there. The colour of these drinks, as well as the use of fruits in product names, created the impression that they contain fruit juice, when in reality some contained none at all. The word "flavour" has since been added to the label to indicate they don't contain fruit juice, but this does not address our concern about the overall implication that these are healthy drinks.

Puffed-up puffery

CHOICE sent a letter of complaint to the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) in 2008 regarding VitaminWater and its mockery of food labelling laws. Their response was underwhelming: "It is the view of the ACCC that the product labelling does not create a misleading impression to ordinary consumers that the product has any particular health benefits. Rather, the representations amount to puffery. As such, the ACCC will not be taking any further action in relation to this matter."

Dawn of a booming industry

The popularity of these drinks has turned nutrient-enhanced water into a booming industry, with Grassroots, NutrientWater, Spring Valley Smart Water, Aldi's Morning Noon or Night and many others available on the market.

Most subscribe to Glacéau's marketing tactics, using names, graphics and packaging to convey an impression of healthiness. The NutrientWater Cranberry Grapefruit bottle, for example, says: "Although your GP may not recommend this product as a substitute for your balanced diet, eight hours' sleep and daily workout, it does contain a formula of essential vitamins and minerals, which is good … after all, who always manages time out for steamed greens, early nights and pre-dawn power walks?" CHOICE believes this kind of marketing creates the impression that the product can be used as a safety net for a poor lifestyle, while omitting the word "flavour" alongside "cranberry grapefruit" implies the product contains cranberry and grapefruit juice – not cranberry and grapefruit *flavours* as listed in the ingredients.

Stick with real fruit

A bottle of vitamin-enhanced water provides about 5g of sugar and 90kJ per 100mL. Fruit juice contains about 8g of sugar and 150kJ per 100mL, so the enhanced water looks pretty good on a per-100mL basis. But fruit juice – with a recommended serving of 125mL-250mL – usually comes in a 200mL-375mL bottle, whereas enhanced waters come in 500mL and 600mL bottles intended for a single serve.

Some companies produce low-calorie and sugar-free versions of enhanced waters, which solves the sugar concern, but there are better ways to get your nutrients. A small apple provides antioxidants equivalent to about 1500mg of vitamin C – a lot more than the 25mg in a bottle of Spring Valley Smart Water Goji & Wildberry, which claims to contain antioxidants. A medium orange has more vitamin C (86mg) than a whole bottle of Grassroots Acai & Mandarin with ginseng and vitamin C (39.6mg). Fruit also contains fibre and a range of other nutrients not found in enhanced water.

CHOICE VERDICT

In Australia, enhanced waters are made according to permissions outlined in Standard 2.6.2 of the Food Standards Code. This permits vitamins and minerals to be added to water-based beverages that may be sweetened with sugar, fruit juice and/or artificial sweeteners. CHOICE opposed these permissions because we believed it would result in misleading promotions – and these drinks are proof we were right all along.

Don't buy into the marketing hype around vitamin-enhanced waters – they're really just cordials with a few added vitamins. Treat them like any other sugary or artificial drink and enjoy only as an occasional treat. ■

Lab tests

Home entertainment, whitegoods, household and personal appliances – they're all tested here.

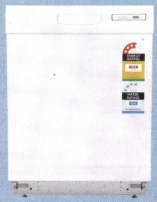
STEAM IRONS PAGE 55

Fiona Pollard tests steam irons in the CHOICE laundry lab.

Inside

42 Blu-ray players

46 Dishwashers



Plus

50 High-end vacuum cleaners
55 Steam irons
58 Landline phones
62 Compact fluorescent lamps
63 Microwaves

CHOICE. The People's Watchdog

CHOICE has its own testing laboratories, where experienced technical staff put products through their paces. We use test methods from Australian standards, and we develop our own to match the way consumers use a product in their homes. We buy the products we test, to maintain our independence from manufacturers and so we know what you're faced with in the shops. Our recommendations are based on a product's quality and performance, with no hidden bias.

CHOICE SHOPPER For the best deal on products where you see this logo, call 1300 360 655. Have the model name and number, the price you've been quoted and your CHOICE personal subscriber number.

CHOICE ONLINE / CHOICE VIDEO When you see one of these headings, there is more information about this story at **www.choice.com.au**.

CHOICE BEST BUY Our testers award a product a Best Buy if it delivers high quality at a comparatively low price. Not every product test report includes Best Buys.

CHOICE GREEN BUY Our researchers award a Green Buy to a product that delivers good quality and environmental performance. Not every test report includes Green Buys.

STORY CHRIS RUGGLES

To BD or not to BD?

Blu-ray players are the next step up from the DVD player, but how effective is the evolution?

NUTSHELL

>> Picture quality is excellent for all BD players on test, so let features and ease of use guide your purchase decision.

>> All players on test can make a DVD look even better on an HD TV by upscaling it to 1080p.

None of the Blu-ray (BD) players in this test can record content, but many can stream video from the internet as well as play multiple formats, including most CDs and DVDs – and, of course, Blu-ray discs. One of the most impressive features common to all these players is the ability to upscale a normal DVD to the same 1080p resolution as Blu-ray (see What to Look For, page 44). They do this very well; in most cases we couldn't see any difference, and only minor variations when we could.

All the products in our What to Buy list (opposite) are good performers, and because there isn't much difference in picture quality you should make your choice based on ease of use, features and price. >

HOW WE TEST

Ease of use We check to see how easy the player's remote control, menu system and other functions are to use. Players that have BD-Live are timed to see how long it takes to download BD-Live data and features.

Picture quality is assessed by three testers using two identical reference screens. We watch three BD movies and a 1080p movie shot on a high-quality consumer video camera with each player. We view a DVD movie in its native format and then upscaled to 1080p.

Versatility is scored on the number and type of formats the player supports, its connections and networking ability as well as any interactive functions.

Load time is the time it takes for each player to load a DVD and three different BDs. Each disc is loaded into the player three times and the average time recorded.

Error correction We use a specially made DVD with gradations of errors to check how well each player handles faulty DVDs.

Power consumption Each player's consumption is measured when the disc is spinning, in standby mode with power save off and quick start on (if possible) and again with power save off and quick start off.

ABOUT THE REST

The **LG BD550** just misses out on making our What to Buy list mainly due to its reduced versatility score. This is partly because it has no wireless capability.

The **NAD** has no wireless or video-streaming function and can't be updated via the internet, but is the only model on test that can be fully operated without its remote control.

The **Sony BDP-S370** has an optional wireless connection, but you'll have to buy a separate wireless dongle to use it. Fortunately, it has two USB ports, either of which can be used for this.

The **Loewe** is by far the most expensive BD player on test, but it lacks both wireless and video-streaming functions.

Both the **Panasonic DMP-BDT100** and **DMP-BDT300** are 3D-capable; the **Panasonic DMP-BD45** is the only player on test not to support BD-Live. The **Loewe**, **NAD** and **Pioneer** have 1GB of internal memory – all the rest will need at least this much external memory attached to their USB port to access BD-Live.

The **Pioneer BDP-LX52** has no wireless function or DLNA server and cannot stream from YouTube or any other services. It's also one of the slowest players to load BDs and DVDs.

The **Onkyo** doesn't support wireless and cannot stream from YouTube, a DLNA server or any other services. It's also very slow to load DVDs.

All the **Panasonic** players on test are very slow to load both DVDs and BDs. They have their on-board controls at the top of the player, which can make it difficult to stack other components on top. Wireless is optional on the **DMP-BDT100** and available via a supplied dongle on the **DMP-BDT300** and **DMP-BD85**, but the other two don't support it. They all have a slot for SD, SDHC and SDXC cards.

WHAT TO BUY

74% Samsung BD-C5500

BEST BUY

PRICE $229

74% Samsung BD-C6500

PRICE $449

74% Samsung BD-C6900

PRICE $559

There's little to pick between these players in terms of performance; the BD-C6900 is dearer as it is 3D-ready and has 7.1 analog audio output. All come with HDMI, component and composite video output, optical digital audio output, USB port/s, an ethernet port and wireless connectivity (optional for the BD-C5500). They support BD-Live (see BD-Live Explained, below) and come with 1GB of internal memory except the BD-C5500, which requires 1GB via its USB port. They can stream videos from YouTube, have some BigPond applications and connect to a DLNA server to stream media. In addition, all have Samsung's Internet@TV online service.

71% LG BD570

PRICE $269

This player comes with HDMI, component and composite video output, coaxial digital audio output, USB port, an ethernet port and built-in wireless connectivity. It has the BD-Live feature, but you'll need an external memory of at least 1GB to download BD-Live content. It can stream videos from YouTube and connect to a DLNA server to stream media. It also has LG's NetCast online service, which can receive services such as Picasa Web Albums and AccuWeather.

72% Sony BDP-S570

PRICE $379

71% Sony BDP-S770

PRICE $449

70% Sony BDP-S470

PRICE $299

These 3D-ready BD players come with HDMI, component and composite video output, both coaxial and optical digital audio output, a pair of USB ports, an ethernet port and built-in wireless connectivity (optional on the BDP-S470). They're BD-Live models that come with 1GB of internal memory except the BDP-S470, which requires 1GB via its USB port. They can stream videos from YouTube and connect to a DLNA server to stream media, and Sony's BRAVIA Internet Video service allows you to stream video, music and photos. You can also download a free iPhone remote control application from the Apple App Store. Load times for Blu-ray discs are quite consistent for these three Sony models, but the BDP-S770 takes about twice as long as the others to load a DVD (41 seconds).

DID YOU KNOW?

BD-LIVE EXPLAINED

BD-Live is interactive content delivered via the internet to a BD-Live enabled player. The content appears to be dependent on the disc title, and each title offers different experiences; for example, *Iron Man* has trivia questions, *Transformers* has "behind the scenes" footage, and *The Bourne Supremacy* has trailers for other movies.

The server to which the player connects when downloading content may contribute to intermittent connection and downloading issues. Overall, we found BD-Live to be an underwhelming experience, but there may be more compelling offerings in the future.

One of the most impressive features common to all these players is their ability to upscale a normal DVD to the same resolution as Blu-ray

BEST VALUE BEST VALUE BEST VALUE BEST VALUE
choice shopper
For the best deal, call CHOICE Shopper, 1300 360 655, with the model name and number, the price you want to beat and your CHOICE personal subscriber number. The full range of models on test may not be available in all states.

Your Blu-ray disc player needs the best possible video connection to enjoy the full benefits

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

DVD upscaling allows you to view your current DVD titles in an "enhanced video" mode, where the picture is interpolated to either 1080i or 1080p so your DVD movie looks very much like HD. (1080 is the number of lines the TV uses to display the picture, and is regarded as high-resolution/high-definition. The "i" and "p" denote different ways of displaying those lines.) However, you need an HDMI connection and a TV that can display HD to enjoy the benefits.

The remote control should have buttons that are sized, shaped and spaced so you can easily find and press them individually. They should be grouped so you can go quickly to specific functions, and the most commonly used buttons should be prominent.

USB ports allow you to plug in storage devices to play formats other than DVD and BD, or a wireless dongle if the player supports wireless (see table, below right). Having two USB ports is handy if you're likely to need to do both.

Memory cards can be taken directly from a camera or similar device and plugged into some players. Otherwise, you can use them in the same way you would a USB storage device.

Internet connection delivers a range of features, but not all are available on every model. Some use the internet connection to upgrade the firmware or operating software of the player, giving you added features and functionality.

Video streaming All players on test that can support video streaming also support YouTube video.

Digital Living Network Alliance (DLNA) is a new standard for networking electronic devices designed to make downloading and watching video, photos and music on your consumer electronics products (such as TVs, DVRs and Blu-ray/DVD players) easier.

3D-ready means the player will recognise and play a 3D disc, but you'll need a 3D-capable TV to see the image in 3D.

GETTING CONNECTED

Your Blu-ray player needs the best

PRODUCT	PERFORMANCE								FEATURES	
Brand / model (in rank order)	Overall score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Picture quality score (%)	Versatility score (%)	Load time score (%)	Error correction score (%)	Power consumption score (%)	Power consumption (W, disc spinning / standby)	USB ports	Memory card type
Samsung BD-C5500	74	62	98	74	37	100	91	12.3 / 1.4	Front / rear (A)	None
Samsung BD-C6500	74	62	98	77	36	100	90	13.8 / 1.4	Front	None
Samsung BD-C6900	74	62	99	79	36	100	88	15.6 / 1.9	Front	None
Sony BDP-S570	72	52	97	85	34	100	90	13.8 / 7.9	Front / rear	None
LG BD570	71	60	96	76	33	80	93	16.3 / 1.4	Front	None
Sony BDP-S770	71	52	97	81	30	100	90	14.1 / 7.5	Front / rear	None
Sony BDP-S470	70	52	97	75	34	100	90	13.6 / 7.7	Front / rear (B)	None
LG BD550	69	60	97	56	36	80	94	15.2 / 0.7	Front	None
NAD T 557	68	65	98	71	24	90	60	18.1 / 1.6	Front	None
Sony BDP-S370	68	51	97	75	34	80	88	15.7 / 7.4	Front / rear (B)	None
Loewe BluTech Vision Interactive	65	52	98	69	33	80	70	18.7 / 1.7	Front	None
Panasonic DMP-BD85	65	45	100	76	20	80	89	14.9 / 8.3	Front / rear (A)	SD, SDHC, SD
Panasonic DMP-BDT100	65	45	100	72	27	90	77	16.7 / 7.8	Front	SD, SDHC, SD
Panasonic DMP-BDT300	65	44	100	78	23	80	85	19.3 / 8.5	Front / rear (A)	SD, SDHC, SD
Pioneer BDP-LX52	65	59	99	51	17	100	78	21.3 / 1.5	Rear	None
Onkyo BD-SP308	64	59	96	60	20	80	72	16.3 / 1.5	Front	None
Panasonic DMP-BD45	63	45	100	51	29	80	97	11.1 / 6.9	None	SD, SDHC, SD
Panasonic DMP-BD65	61	45	100	63	19	63	88	15.5 / 8.5	Front	SD, SDHC, SD

USING THE TABLE Scores The overall score is made up of: Ease of use: 30%; Picture quality: 20%; Versatility: 15%; Load time: 15%; Error correction: 10%; Power consumption: 10%. **Features** See What to Look For, above. **Price** Recommended retail, as of December 2010.

possible video connection to enjoy the full benefits. All of the following connection options are able to show a Blu-ray movie, but if your TV can't handle at least a component connection, there's no difference in video quality using Blu-ray over a standard DVD player.

Composite is found on most modern TVs and uses a single yellow RCA connector. All players on test have one.

Component provides up to HD (1080i) quality if the TV can display the resolution. Three video cables are required to show the video, and you need a separate cable for sound. All players on test have at least one except the Panasonic DMP-BD45.

HDMI (High-Definition Multimedia Interface) is a digital connection for both video and sound in one cable, with the latest version being 1.4. HDMI is also the only connection that can accommodate the upscaling of video to a higher resolution. All players on test have HDMI.

Toslink (optical) and RCA (coaxial) outputs provide a digital audio connection; either is a good option if you're unable to use HDMI to connect your Blu-ray player to your home theatre system. However, while these connections support most digital audio formats, they don't support formats such as Dolby TrueHD and DTS-HD Master audio signals.

	SPECIFICATIONS							
	Update via internet	Video streaming	BD-Live	DLNA	3D-ready	Dimensions (cm, H x W x D)	Weight (kg)	Price ($)
ptional, 802.11a/b/g/n	√	√	√	√		4.5 x 43 x 20.5	1.7	229
uilt-in, 802.11b/g/n	√	√	√	√		4.5 x 43 x 22	1.7	449
uilt-in, 802.11b/g/n	√	√	√	√	√	4.5 x 43 x 20	1.8	559
uilt-in, 802.11a/b/g/n	√	√	√	√	√	4.5 x 43 x 21	2.3	379
uilt-in, 802.11b/g/n	√	√	√	√		5 x 43 x 20.5	2.0	269
uilt-in, 802.11a/b/g/n	√	√	√	√	√	5 x 43 x 21.5	2.5	449
ptional	√	√	√	√	√	3.5 x 43 x 21	2.0	299
one	√	√	√			5 x 43 x 20.5	2.0	199
one			√	√		6 x 43.5 x 28	3.4	599
ptional	√	√	√	√		3.5 x 43 x 21	2.0	229
one			√			6 x 43 x 26	2.7	1599
ngle, 802.11a/b/g/n	√	√	√	√		5.5 x 43 x 24.5	2.6	399
ptional	√	√	√	√	√	6 x 43 x 21	2.1	295
ngle, 802.11a/b/g/n	√	√	√	√	√	7 x 43 x 24	2.6	399
one	√		√			8.5 x 42 x 28	3.6	999
one			√			5.3 x 43.5 x 21	2.0	599
one						5 x 43 x 20	2.0	199
one	√	√	√			5 x 43 x 20	2.0	249

BLE NOTES (A) Rear USB port is for a wireless LAN adapter. **(B)** One port is used for the wireless adapter, t can be either port.

BLU-RAY MOVIE BLUES

You'd be forgiven for thinking all BD movies are created equal, but a recent test by our UK sister organisation, *Which?*, found some significant differences in image quality. They looked at 17 movies that are available in both DVD and BD formats, and found eight showed little or no difference in quality between formats. Five movies really stood out because the BD version was exceptional, and a further four were definitely improved in the BD version.

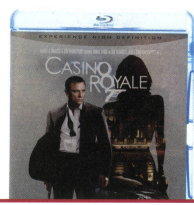
Industry sources refused to comment on the specific reasons for these inconsistencies, but it's no great leap to suggest that the movies have been converted from different sources of differing quality. Some will be taken from the original film stock, while others will have been up-converted from standard definition sources made for TV. Consumers shouldn't be made to pay more for little or no improvement in image quality, so we support *Which?*'s call for BD movies to clearly indicate on the label whether or not the movie is remastered from source materials.

The best-quality BD movies:

- *Avatar*
- *Casino Royale*
- *From Russia with Love*
- *The Wizard of Oz*
- *Zulu*

Little improvement to DVD:

- *Matrix Reloaded*
- *Die Hard*
- *North by Northwest*
- *Gangs of New York*
- *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World*
- *The Untouchables*
- *The Graduate*
- *Ghostbusters*



NUTSHELL

>> 12 new dishwashers on test, priced between $499 and $2499.
>> A newcomer in our What to Buy list tops the overall scores.

STORY MATTHEW STEEN

Clean and green

The latest dishwashers do their bit for the environment by cleverly recycling water from the previous wash.

Water is a precious and increasingly expensive resource, and dishwasher manufacturers are responding to the challenge of conserving it. Some of the latest designs have storage tanks built into the dishwasher, storing water from the last cycle so it can be used for the pre-rinse in the next wash cycle. This should increase water-efficiency ratings to a healthy 5½ stars without compromising wash performance.

However, storing water creates the potential problem of bacterial growth. Some upcoming designs overcome this by including a feature that monitors the time between washes – so if you are away for several days, on holiday for example, stored water is flushed away and you won't be assaulted by a strange smell on your dishes when you return and run your dishwasher.

Some models on test here recycle water by storing both clean water from the mains supply and the steam that condenses from the final rinse in a heat exchange. However, there is no timer for this feature, so before going away for any length of time, you'll need to drain the water left in the dishwasher by using a suitable program. All the Bosch and Siemens models contain this technology except the slimline Bosch, and this is reflected in their water usage results in our test.

The **Siemens SN56M532AU/08** also stands out in another way. The sole newcomer to make our What to Buy list, it elbows out the previous top performer, the AEG Electrolux F890201M, to top the list (see *CHOICE*, September 2010, page 52). Four other dishwashers remain top recommendations from the test we conducted earlier in the year. To compare profiles of the newest models with those tested previously, see *CHOICE*, June 2010, page 49. >

HOW WE TEST & WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Refer to *CHOICE*, February 2010, page 49, to see how we test dishwashers and what to look for when buying one.

WHAT TO BUY

81% Siemens SN56M532AU/08

PRICE $1799

This semi-integrated model has the highest overall score and is a very good water-efficient product. It is one of the lowest users of water for a full-sized model, is energy-efficient and washes and dries well. Features include child-lock controls, a delay start and time-to-go display, as well as an easy-to-lift top basket that can be adjusted when loaded. On the downside, it lacks an eco-wash program.

WHAT TO BUY

STANDARD	
NEW **Siemens** SN56M532AU/08	$1799
AEG Electrolux F890201M	$2319
Asko D5131	$1299
Bosch Classic Electronic SMS50E12AU/07 GREEN BUY	$1249
SLIMLINE	
AEG Electrolux F65411VI	$1639

A Green Buy is a good overall performer that's very energy and water-efficient, from a brand with a good reliability rating, and whose combined purchase price and running cost is among the lowest on test.

ABOUT THE REST

Only the newly tested models are listed here in rank order. To find out more about previously tested machines, see the table on page 48.

STANDARD SIZE

The **LG LD-1419W2** has an excellent drying score, and most of its other scores are good, apart from energy efficiency, which is only OK. It also has a long program time. Features include child-lock controls, a delay start and a time-to-go display and an easy-to-lift top basket that can be adjusted when loaded.

The **AEG Electrolux F88025VIM** is very good at washing and drying, but only OK for both water and energy efficiency. Features include a time-to-go display, delay start and an easy-to-lift top basket that can be adjusted when loaded, though this is on one side only. It also features a sanitise program that claims to provide more hygienically clean dishes and glasses.

The **Miele G1022i** is excellent at drying, but only has an OK energy efficiency score. Features include a child-lock door, removable and foldable tines and an easy-to-lift top basket that can be adjusted when loaded. It lacks an eco-wash program and has a relatively long cycle time.

The **Indesit DFG261S** is water-efficient and very good at drying, but is let down by its only OK scores for washing performance and energy efficiency. Features include delay start and a height-adjustable basket. It also has a relatively long cycle time.

The **Asko D5893 XXL** is water-efficient and excellent for drying, but its washing performance and energy efficiency are only OK. Features include child-lock controls, height-adjustable basket and a delay start. It also has the longest cycle time of any dishwasher in the table (page 48).

The **Delonghi DEDW60S** is very energy- and water-efficient, but it's only OK for washing performance and has a relatively long program time. Features include a delay start, time-to-go display and an easy-to-lift top basket that can be adjusted when loaded. It lacks an eco-wash program.

The **Smeg PL8210X-1** is good overall, but let down by only OK scores for washing performance and energy. Features include a delay start and a height-adjustable basket that can be adjusted when loaded.

The **Omega DW402WA** is very energy- and water-efficient but doesn't dry very well. Features are limited but include a height-adjustable basket. It lacks an eco-wash program.

SLIMLINE / COMPACT

The **Fisher & Paykel DD60SDFTX6** is a tall dish drawer that is very energy efficient and dries well, but is let down by its washing performance. Features include child-lock door and controls and also a delay start. The model we initially tested had a poor fitting base plate that resulted in a lower performance score than when replaced with a better-designed base plate. Fisher & Paykel have told CHOICE that if you own this model (produced prior to August 2010) and are getting poor wash results, you can contact them on 1300 650 590 and they will replace the base plate under warranty.

The **Omega DW101 WA** is a basic benchtop model that has excellent energy efficiency, but its drying ability is poor. It also lacks an eco-wash program.

The **Technika TDX45S** is very energy-efficient and dries well, but is let down by its washing performance. It's also the loudest washer out of the newly tested models, but has a short cycle time. Features are limited but include a height-adjustable basket. It lacks an eco-wash program.

CHOICE ONLINE

Some lesser-performing dishwashers are not included in the table (page 48). For the complete listing, log on to **www.choice.com.au/dishwashers**

ACCESSIBILITY

Using Independent Living Centre guidelines, our testers assess the newly tested models for people with disabilities. These are the best options:

- For people with upper limb dysfunction – the **Fisher & Paykel DD60SDFTX6**.
- For people with vision impairment – while we can't recommend any models, the newly tested **Miele**, **Omega**, **Fisher & Paykel** and **Technika** dishwashers all have good visual access to the controls.
- For people with cognitive disability – none of the newly tested models score very well.

For more on what to look for, log on to **www.choice.com.au/access**

RELIABILITY

Refer to *CHOICE*, May 2010, page 16, for the results of our latest reliability survey, or log on to **www.choice.com.au/appliancereliability**.

PRODUCT		PERFORMANCE										FEATURES				
	Brand / model (in rank order)	Overall score (%)	Washing performance score (%)	Water efficiency score (%)	Drying performance score (%)	Energy efficiency score (%)	Water used (L)	Energy used (kWh)	Noise (dB)	Cycle time (mins)	Auto program / dirt sensor	Easy-to-lift, height-adjustable top basket	Fold-down / removable plate racks	Anti-flood hose	Half-load option	Eco wash
STANDARD SIZE	# Siemens SN56M532AU/08	81	79	93	77	77	12	1.07	40	127	√ / √	√	F	√	√	
	AEG Electrolux F890201M (A)	79	85	60	95	60	24	1.64	44	116	√ / √	√ (G)	F	√		√
	Asko D5131	78	77	76	99	60	20	1.65	53	156	- / -			√		√
	Bosch SMS50E12AU/07 (B)	77	75	92	59	89	12	0.66	41	151	- / -		F	√	√	
	Dishlex DX301WK	77	80	67	92	62	21	1.57	48	114	√ / √	√	F			√
	# LG LD-1419W2	77	76	71	95	66	23	1.45	42	173	√ / √	√	F	√	√	√
	Westinghouse WDF901WA (C)	77	79	72	92	61	19	1.60	49	104	- / √					√
	Bosch SMS63M08AU (D)	76	67	92	93	76	12	1.10	37	125	√ / √	√	F	√	√	
	Dishlex DX103WK	76	78	67	95	57	21	1.73	48	113	- / -					√
	Dishlex DX203WK	76	74	76	91	66	17	1.44	50	100	- / -					√
	Electrolux ESL66010 (E)	76	80	62	88	60	23	1.62	49	114	√ / √	√	F	√		√
	Westinghouse WDU903SA	76	81	60	93	59	24	1.68	48	117	√ / √	√	F	√		√
	# AEG Electrolux F88025VIM	75	80	59	86	60	24	1.65	43	115	√ / √	√ (G)		√	√	√
	# Miele G1022i	75	74	72	91	63	19	1.53	42	139	√ / √	√	F, R	√		
	Asko D5233	74	70	82	91	64	17	1.49	50	176	√ / √		F	√		
	Bosch SMU68M05AU/01 (F)	74	64	94	88	75	12	1.12	38	133	√ / √	√	F	√	√	
	Smeg SA8210X-1	74	77	80	68	60	18	1.63	53	113	- / -	√		√	√	√
	V-Zug Adora 60SL	74	73	66	91	67	21	1.39	50	105	√ / √	√	F	√	√	√
	Bosch SMS50E22AU/07	73	69	92	54	90	12	0.63	45	152	- / -	√	F	√	√	
	Electrolux EX601SC	73	78	62	81	59	23	1.65	45	115	√ / √		F	√		√
	Whirlpool ADP6000WH	73	64	79	92	79	16	1.02	49	149	- / -	√	F	√		√
	Whirlpool ADP7000	73	75	79	51	81	16	0.93	53	130	- / -	√	F	√	√	
	Ariston LBF51	72	70	83	84	58	16	1.69	49	138	- / -	√				√
	Fisher & Paykel DD60DCW6	72	64	81	94	72	15	1.22	49	113	- / -	na (H)	F		√	√
	Fisher & Paykel DW60D0X1	72	69	86	78	64	15	1.49	36	147	√ / √	√	F	√		√ (J)
	# Indesit DFG261S	72	66	84	89	65	16	1.47	44	133	- / -	√			√	√
	LG LD-1420T2	72	65	82	91	70	17	1.31	41	183	√ / √		F	√	√	√
	Siemens SN45E502AU	72	68	92	51	90	12	0.64	45	152	- / -	√	F	√	√	
	Smeg ST8605-1	72	75	79	63	61	19	1.59	53	109	- / -	√			√	√
	Smeg SA8605X	71	76	78	55	64	19	1.50	47	105	- / -	√	F	√	√	√
	Baumatic BAD6002	70	61	79	78	83	16	0.88	53	135	- / -	√	F		√	
	Miele G1023	70	67	72	81	65	19	1.48	43	134	√ / √	√	F	√		
	# Asko D5893 XXL	71	61	86	96	65	15	1.47	44	196	√ / √	√		√	√	
	# DeLonghi DEDW60S	71	64	88	70	81	12	0.94	48	133	- / -	√	F	√	√	
	# Smeg PL8210X-1	71	69	78	75	66	19	1.44	46	107	- / -	√			√	√
	Asko D5233 XXL	69	64	80	80	65	18	1.46	50	168	√ / √		F	√		
	# Omega DW402WA	69	71	89	30	80	14	0.97	45	125	- / -	√				
SLIMLINE / COMPACT	AEG Electrolux F65411VI	74	76	57	94	62	19	1.56	51	114	√ / √	√	F	√		√
	# Fisher & Paykel DD60SDFTX6	73	63	78	90	89	8	0.66	44	115	- / -	na (H)	F, R			√
	Bosch SRU53E05AU/13	72	70	76	62	87	13	0.74	49	146	- / -	√	F	√		√
	Fisher & Paykel DD60SCW6	72	64	79	94	72	8	0.61	49	113	- / -	na (H)	F		√	√
	# Omega DW101WA	70	69	76	42	94	9	0.49	46	109	- / -	na (H)				
	# Technika TDX4SS	70	59	79	83	88	11	0.70	52	99	- / -	√			√	

SPECIFICATIONS							COSTS	
Fast wash	Dimensions (cm. H x W x D)	Water connection	Place settings	Type*	Colour*	Contact	Running cost ($ / 10 years)	Price ($)*
✓	82 x 60 x 55	H or C	14	SI	SS	siemens.com.au	845	1799
✓	82 x 60 x 58	C rec	12	SI	SS	aeg-electrolux.com.au	1329	2319
✓	82 x 60 x 56	C rec	14	BI	W	asko.com.au	1314	1299
✓	82 x 60 x 57	C rec	14	FW	W	bosch.com.au	548	1249
✓	82 x 60 x 60	C rec	12	FW	W	dishlex.com.au	1261	1009
✓	85 x 60 x 60	H or C	14	FW	W	lge.com.au	1181	899
✓	82 x 60 x 57	C rec	12	FW	W	westinghouse.com.au	1272	899
✓	82 x 60 x 60	C only	14	FW	SS	bosch.com.au	869	1749
✓	85 x 60 x 61	H or C	12	FW	W	dishlex.com.au	1376	739
✓	82 x 60 x 58	C rec	12	FW	W	dishlex.com.au	1146	849
✓	82 x 60 x 55	C rec	12	FI	FI	electrolux.com.au	1309	1479
✓	82 x 60 x 59	C rec	12	BI	SS	westinghouse.com.au	1358	1219
✓	82 x 60 x 56	C only	12	BI	SS	aeg-electrolux.com.au	1337	2219
✓	81 x 60 x 57	H or C	12	SI	SS	miele.com.au	1219	1199
✓	82 x 60 x 55	C rec	14	SI	W	asko.com.au	1181	1799
✓	82 x 60 x 57	C rec	15	SI	SS	bosch.com.au	883	1899
	87 x 60 x 60	H or C	14	FW	SS	smeg.com.au	1288	1390
✓	85 x 60 x 57	H or C	12	SI	SS	vzug.com	1130	2990
✓	82 x 60 x 57	C rec	14	FW	W	bosch.com.au	526	1399
✓	82 x 60 x 58	C rec	12	BI	SS	electrolux.com.au	1330	1639
	85 x 60 x 58	H or C	12	FW	W	whirlpool.com.au	854	699
	82 x 60 x 54	H or C	12	FI	FI	whirlpool.com.au	769	1199
	85 x 60 x 60	H or C	14	FW	W	aristonbrand.com	1321	799
✓	82 x 60 x 58	C rec	12	BI	W	fp.com.au	973	1799
(J)	82 x 60 x 60	C rec	14	FW	SS	fp.com.au	1172	1680
	85 x 60 x 60	H or C	14	FW	SS	arisit.com.au	1199	749
	82 x 60 x 60	H or C	14	FW	SS	lge.com.au	1049	1549
✓	82 x 60 x 57	C rec	14	BI	SS	siemens.com	533	1649
	86 x 60 x 55	H or C	14	FI	FI	smeg.com.au	1265	1690
	86 x 60 x 57	H or C	14	BI	W	smeg.com.au	1199	1690
	85 x 60 x 60	C only	12	FW	W	baumatic.com.au	730	1099
	85 x 60 x 60	H or C	12	FW	W	miele.com.au	1182	1199
	86 x 60 x 56	H or C	14	FI	FI	asko.com.au	1163	2499
	85 x 60 x 58	H or C	12	FW	SS	delonghi.com.au	752	999
	82 x 60 x 57	H or C	14	SI	SS	smeg.com.au	1155	1390
	86 x 60 x 55	H or C	14	BI (K)	SS	asko.com.au	1164	2099
	85 x 60 x 60	H or C	14	FW	W	omegaappliances.com.au	782	699
	82 x 45 x 55	C rec	9	FI	FI	aeg-electrolux.com.au	1243	1639
	48 x 60 x 57	C rec	6	BI	SS	fp.com.au	544	1299
	81 x 45 x 57	C rec	9	BI	SS	bosch.com.au	611	1349
	41 x 60 x 57	C rec	6	BI	W	fp.com.au	973	1029
	44 x 55 x 50	H or C	6	FW	W	omegaappliances.com.au	436	499
	85 x 45 x 58	H or C	8	FW	SS	technika.com.au	571	599

USING THE TABLE Scores The overall score is made up of: Washing performance: 55%; Water efficiency: 15%; Drying performance: 15%; Energy efficiency: 15%.

Noise is measured 1m away and 1m up from the dishwasher, which is placed within cabinetry. The actual noise level you hear varies depending on the layout of your kitchen, but our reading gives a comparative measure. A difference of 3dB is noticeable to the human ear.

Features See What to Look For, *CHOICE* February 2010, page 50.

Water connection: H or C You can connect the dishwasher to hot or cold water. Connecting to hot water is likely to shorten the cycle time, but you may lose program versatility. You may need a tempering valve to connect to solar hot water, as the inlet temperature generally should not exceed 60°C.

C rec The manufacturer recommends connecting to a cold tap, and the dishwasher heats the water itself (all dishwashers have a heater). **C only** You can only connect the dishwasher to a cold tap.

Type: FW Freestanding, with a worktop (can generally be inbuilt as well). **BI** Built-in – might not have top or side panels; must be enclosed and anchored to prevent it from tipping forward when fully loaded and dish racks are pulled out. SI and FI are also built-in. **SI** Semi-integrated – you can fit a panel to the door under the controls' fascia to match the rest of your kitchen cupboard doors. **FI** Fully integrated – the entire front of the machine can match your kitchen, with the controls hidden inside the door.

Running costs This is an estimate of how much the dishwasher will cost over 10 years for water and electricity if you wash a full load every day using a normal or auto-sensing cycle, based on 20c per kWh for electricity and $1.50 per 1000l water.

Price Recommended retail, as of November 2010.

TABLE NOTES # Indicates a newly tested model.

* Where possible, we've listed the white model code (W) and price. Most models are available in other colours, finishes or types – usually at a higher price. Where the model numbers are different we've listed them below. The colour given for SI models is for the control panel. **SS** indicates any metallic or metallic-look finish; not all models are actually stainless steel. **na** Not applicable – only has one drawer, or in the case of the Fisher & Paykel Double DishDrawer DD60DCW6, two separate drawers.

(A) The **AEG Electrolux F88015VI ($1529)** is technically similar and should perform the same on the test program.

(B) The **Bosch SMU50E15AU ($1399)** is technically similar and should perform the same on the test program.

(C) The **Westinghouse WDF902 ($1009, white)** is technically similar and should perform the same on the test program.

(D) The **Bosch SBV63M00AU ($2049)** and **SMS65MI5AU ($1679)** are technically similar and should perform the same on the test program. However, the latter has limited distribution and may be harder to find.

(E) The **Electrolux ESL66010B ($1799, black)** is technically similar and should perform the same on the test program.

(F) The **Bosch SMS68M02AU ($1749)** is technically similar and should perform the same on the test program.

(G) One side only.

(H) Has height-adjustable cup racks.

(J) Cannot be selected by user – wash cycle is chosen by auto-sensing program.

(K) Controls are on the top of the door (not the front) like a fully integrated model.

STORY MATTHEW STEEN

A change in the wind

CHOICE testing of high-end vacuum cleaners finds you don't need to spend a fortune to guarantee top performance.

NUTSHELL

>> 15 high-end vacuum cleaners on test, priced between $499 and $1499.
>> New sand in our performance testing method makes good or very good scores for dirt removal more difficult for new vacuums to achieve.

Recent innovations in vacuuming – from cyclonic technologies and robotics to hovering vacuums – have made minimal difference to our cleaning schedules; most households still do a thorough clean about once a week. And although vacuum cleaners are becoming smaller and more manoeuvrable, no vacuum (so far) does the job all by itself, does it well and is cost-effective (see *CHOICE*, November 2010, page 9 for our lukewarm review of the Samsung Navibot automated vacuum).

Eagle-eyed readers will have noticed most high-end vacuum cleaners achieved good or very good dirt removal scores in our last round of testing (*CHOICE* February 2010, page 57). This time round, a couple have been found to be only OK or lower performers (see table, page 52). This is because CHOICE has changed the sand we use in the performance test due to supply. The replacement sand has a different consistency, which makes it difficult for vacuum cleaners to perform as well as they have previously. Because of this change, we haven't included any of the vacuums from previous tests in the current results table.

This round of testing once again confirms that cost is no guide to performance, with the most expensive vacuum on test coming third from the bottom and one of the less

WHAT TO BUY

83% Bosch BSG81266AU/10

BEST BUY

PRICE $599

GOOD POINTS

- Good at picking up dirt from carpet.
- Very good at cleaning corners and along edges.
- Excellent at removing pet hair.
- Good range of tools with on-board storage for all of them.
- Variable power.
- Can also be used with optional cloth bag.
- HEPA filter.
- Excellent reach from the power point.
- Very good long wand.

BAD POINTS

- Hose feels flimsy and crimps easily.

82% Electrolux Ultra One Z8821PT

PRICE $600

GOOD POINTS

- Good at picking up dirt from carpet.
- Very good at cleaning corners and along edges.
- Excellent at removing pet hair.
- Good range of tools with on-board storage for all of them.
- Variable power.
- HEPA filter.
- Excellent reach from the power point.
- Very good long wand.

BAD POINTS

- Hose feels flimsy and crimps easily.

expensive machines, the **Bosch BSG81266AU/10**, coming out on top as our Best Buy.

The top three performers on test are bagged units and the remaining two recommended models are bins. Both systems have their conveniences and drawbacks; a bin means no bags to replace, which is more sustainable, however emptying the bin can be a messy process, with dust and allergens escaping when the bin is tapped to release collected detritus. Your decision about bin or bag will also depend on where you live. Bagged vacuums are more convenient for people in high-rise apartments, as the bags release less dust when being removed; a bin may suit those who live in houses with a yard, so you can dump the contents outside into your compost. >

This round of testing once again confirms that cost is no guide to performance

WHAT TO BUY

81% Wertheim W4412

PRICE $999

GOOD POINTS

- Good at picking up dirt from carpet.
- Very good at cleaning corners and along edges.
- Excellent at removing pet hair.
- Variable power.
- HEPA filter.
- Excellent reach from the power point.

BAD POINTS

- High-pitched noise can be irritating.
- Hose feels flimsy and crimps easily.

80% Electrolux Ultra Active ZUA3860P

PRICE $650

GOOD POINTS

- Good at picking up dirt from carpet.
- Very good at cleaning corners and along edges.
- Excellent at removing pet hair.
- Good range of tools with on-board storage for all of them.
- Variable power.
- HEPA filter.
- Excellent reach from the power point.
- Very good long wand.
- Excellent controls are located at fingertips.

BAD POINTS

- Bin is messy to empty.

80% LG Kompressor VK9820UHAQ

PRICE $700

GOOD POINTS

- Good at picking up dirt from carpet.
- Very good at cleaning corners and along edges.
- Excellent at removing pet hair.
- Good range of tools with on-board storage for all of them.
- Variable power.
- HEPA filter.
- Excellent reach from the power point.
- Very good long wand.
- Excellent controls are located at fingertips.

BAD POINTS

- Bin is messy to empty.

ABOUT THE REST

Of the remaining high-end vacuums on test, four are only OK for ease of use, including the **Dyson DC14** and **DC33**, **Miele Power Plus S7210** and **Wertheim X5000**. The **Bissell**, which is difficult to push over the carpet and under furniture, is borderline for ease of use.

Most vacuums on test have good or better scores for removing dirt from carpet except the **Dyson Compact DC26 HEPA**, which is borderline. The **Wertheim W6035**, **Nilfisk Extreme Free X250** and **LG Kompressor VK9220NH** have only OK scores.

The **Wertheim VC4430**, **X5000**, **W6035** and **LG Kompressor VK9220NH** are only OK for cleaning edges and corners, with the VK9220NH borderline for cleaning pet hair.

For previous test results, log on to **www.choice.com.au/vaccuums**.

choice shopper

For the best deal, call CHOICE Shopper, 1300 360 655, with the model name and number, the price you want to beat and your CHOICE personal subscriber number. The full range of models on test may not be available in all states.

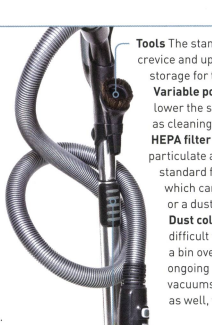
Bin vacuums have lower running costs than bag models, but some require replacement filters as well, which can be a hidden cost

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Light, quiet and **easy to manoeuvre** If you can, try out a vacuum cleaner in the shop to see if it's all these things over both carpet and hard surfaces. A long cord so you're not changing power points and a neat compact design for easy storage are also desirable.

A turbo head has a rotating brush driven by airflow, while a power head uses an inbuilt motor. Our testing shows the power head to be more effective in the main, though they do tend to be more bulky than standard heads.

Adjustable head height allows you to adjust the height of the bristles on the cleaning head to the length of the carpet pile or for when you're vacuuming hard surfaces.



Tools The standard tools to check for are dusting, crevice and upholstery brushes. Having on-board storage for these is convenient.

Variable power/suction allows you to lower the suction for delicate jobs, such as cleaning curtains.

HEPA filter This stands for high-efficiency particulate air filter – an international standard for filters that trap particles, which can help if you have asthma or a dust allergy or sensitivity.

Dust collector None is particularly difficult to empty. One advantage of a bin over a bag is that it has fewer ongoing costs, however some bin vacuums require replacement filters as well, which can be a hidden cost.

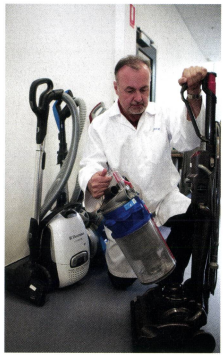
A telescopic wand lets you adjust the wand to suit your height so you don't have to bend too much.

PRODUCT		PERFORMANCE						FEATURES	
Brand / model (in rank order)	Type	Overall score (%)	Dirt removal from carpet score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Cleaning corners and edges score (%)	Pet hair removal score (%)	Noise (dBA)	Power head / turbo brush	Crevice / upholstery tool / dusting brush
Bosch BSG81266AU/10	Barrel	83	78	83	81	100	70	–/✓	✓/✓/✓/✓
Electrolux Ultra One Z8821PT	Barrel	82	74	81	86	100	72	–/✓	✓/✓/✓/✓
Wertheim W4412	Barrel	81	79	71	87	100	71	✓/–	✓/–/✓/✓
Electrolux Ultra Active ZUA3860P	Barrel	80	75	77	80	100	72	✓/–	✓/✓/✓/✓
LG Kompressor VK9820UHAQ	Barrel	80	73	77	86	100	75	–/✓	✓/✓/✓/✓
Dyson DC14	Upright	78	80	66	75	100	77	✓/–	✓/✓/✓/✓
Miele Power Plus S7210	Upright	77	78	69	70	100	72	✓/–	✓/✓/✓/✓
Nilfisk Extreme Free X250	Barrel	76	64	78	81	100	70	–/✓	✓/✓/✓/✓
Bissell Healthy Home 61Z4-F	Upright	75	81	53	75	100	78	✓/✓	✓/–/✓/✓
Wertheim VC4430	Barrel	75	75	71	57	100	72	✓/–	✓/–/✓/✓
Dyson DC33	Upright	74	73	65	70	100	76	✓/–	✓/✓/✓/✓
Wertheim X5000	Barrel	73	74	67	57	100	75	✓/✓	✓/✓/✓/✓
Wertheim W6035	Barrel	72	69	71	57	100	72	✓/✓	✓/✓/✓/✓
Dyson Compact DC26 HEPA	Barrel	69	53	81	85	70	73	–/–	✓/✓/✓/✓
LG Kompressor VK9220NH	Barrel	66	65	78	59	50	71	–/–	✓/✓/✓/✓

USING THE TABLE Scores The overall score is made up of: Dirt removal from carpet: 40%; Ease of use: 30%; Cleaning corners and edges: 15%; Pet hair removal: 15%. All models scored 100% in the scratch test. Pet hair supplied by Woof Cat & Dog Grooming, Bondi. **Noise** For comparison, a typical conversation is carried out at about 60

HOW WE TEST

Dirt removal from carpet Our tester, Peter Horvath, pre-loads the vacuum cleaners with artificial household dust. He embeds sand evenly into a section of carpet and then vacuums. The collected sand is weighed and recorded; this is done twice for each model and the results averaged.
Ease of use testing measures how easy it is to manoeuvre the cleaner; how difficult it is to empty and change the dirt receptacle; operation of the controls; and how easy the supplied accessories are to use and store.
Cleaning corners and edges Sand is spread into a right-angled corner and vacuumed to see how close to the corner each cleaner is able to pick up dirt using the standard cleaning head.
Pet hair removal Peter embeds cat hair into the carpet and vacuums it to a set pattern and speed in exactly the same way as the dirt pickup test.
Scratch test For uprights, he sets the cleaning head to the hard floor setting and stops the brush from rotating where possible; for barrels, he uses the hard floor tool or standard cleaning head set to hard floor. All scored 100%.
Noise is measured at the user's position at maximum power setting. Some models emit a high-pitched whistle that can be irritating, even though they may not be louder than others.



Our Best Buy vacuum cleaner, the Bosch, is the top performer overall and also one of the least expensive models on test

SPECIFICATIONS										COSTS	
Variable suction control	Variable power	HEPA filter	Measured power (W)	Dust collector	Reach from power point (m)	Weight (kg)	Measured dust collector volume (L)	Approximate cost per bag ($) *	Contact	Annual running cost ($)	Price ($)
	√	√	1270	Bag	12.3	7.6	3.4	7.50	boschappliances.com.au	13.20	599
√	√	√	1540	Bag	12.0	8.9	2.7	3.75	electrolux.com.au	16.00	600
	√	√	1720	Bag	11.2	11.4	2.6	3.50	godfreys.com.au	17.90	999
	√	√	1760	Bin	12.0	9.3	1.5	na	electrolux.com.au	18.30	650
	√	√	1530	Bin	12.2	8.9	2.0	na	lge.com.au	15.90	700
			1320	Bin	10.0	8.2	2.0	na	dyson.com.au	13.70	649
	√		1130	Bag	11.3	9.7	4.6	5.50	miele.com.au	11.80	799
	√	√	1560	Bag	12.0	10.1	2.2	4.20	nilfisk-advance.com.au	16.20	599
		√	1250	Bin	10.0	10.3	1.5	na	godfreys.com.au	13.00	699
	√	√	1760	Bag	11.0	11.5	2.6	3.40	godfreys.com.au	18.30	1199
			1340	Bin	10.0	7.8	1.7	na	dyson.com.au	13.90	649
		√	1580	Bin	10.3	10.1	1.1	na	wertheim.net.au	16.40	1199
)	√	√	1730	Bag	12.0	11.2	2.2	4.25	wertheim.net.au	18.00	1499
√		√	1030	Bin	7.8	5.3	0.5	na	dyson.com.au	10.70	600
) √	√	√	1510	Bin	12.2	9.0	1.1	na	lge.com.au	15.70	499

city traffic is measured at about 80dB. **Features** See What to Look For, above left. **Annual running costs** are based on one hour's use per week. **Price** Recommended as of January 2011. **TABLE NOTES** * Usually available in packs of four, five or more and sometimes come with filters as well. **na** Not applicable. **(A)** For two tools only.

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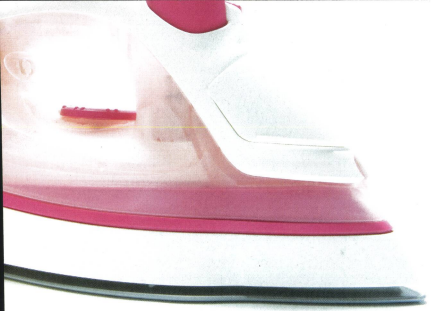


STORY CHRIS BARNES

Pressing concerns

You don't need to spend big bucks to get a good iron – but steer clear of the really cheap ones.

NUTSHELL

>> 11 steam irons on test, priced between $14 and $140.

>> Look for an iron with a reliable thermostat and soleplate that glides easily over garments, and that can produce steam without dribbling water.

Here's a statement you'll probably never hear: "I love ironing!" OK, perhaps some people enjoy it as a meditative exercise, but for most it's a chore. However, it's often necessary, unless you're prepared to pay a laundry service to do the job for you, and even the most ardent ironing-hater will admit there's a certain pleasure in putting on crisply pressed clothes.

While clothes-washing and dishwashing have become largely automated over the past few generations, there haven't been many advances in steam iron technology in that time; the humble iron still has to be wielded by hand. Its most important aspects are a thermostat that reliably and precisely controls the soleplate temperature, so you can tackle a wide range of fabrics, from synthetics and silk (on low temperature), to cotton and linen (on high); the ability to produce a useful amount of steam without dribbling or sputtering water; and a soleplate that glides easily over your clothes.

CHOICE put 11 irons to the test and found several good performers as well as a couple of clunkers (see table, page 56). As in previous tests, the more expensive models (more than $100) are good but not necessarily better than less expensive models, while the cheapest ($20 and under) are the worst performers. The best-value irons lie in the middle, from about $50 to $80. >

WHAT TO BUY

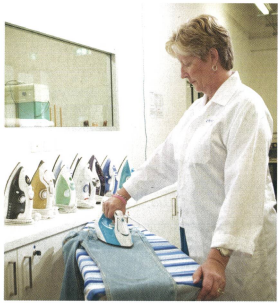
BEST BUY

Philips GC2860	$70
Sunbeam Verve 68 Resilium SR6800	$119
Philips GC4420	$140

HOW WE TEST

Performance Our testers, Peter Horvath and Fiona Pollard, each test every iron on all its temperature settings, from coolest to hottest, using a range of fabrics (synthetic organza, silk, wool, cotton shirt, denim jeans and linen). They assess how effective the iron is at removing creases; models that remove creases quickly without needing the water spray score best. Models that take several passes to remove creases or that need the water spray score lower, while models that leave creases or leak water score lowest. Peter also checks the irons for electrical safety; all passed this test.

Ease of use They assess the irons for ease of filling the water tank (including how easy it is to see the water level); how comfortable the iron is to hold; ease of moving the iron over various fabrics; using the steam and spray functions; adjusting the temperature; and convenience of the cord, including storage.



WHAT TO BUY

91% Philips GC2860

BEST BUY

PRICE $70

GOOD POINTS

- Excellent at ironing silk, wool, cotton, denim and linen, and very good on organza.
- Very easy to use.
- Excellent water container; water level is easy to see.
- Soleplate glides across the material very well.
- Excellent steam function.
- Very good cord storage.

BAD POINTS

- None to mention.

84% Sunbeam Verve 68 SR6800

PRICE $119

GOOD POINTS

- Excellent at ironing silk, wool, cotton and denim, and very good on linen.
- Easy to use.
- Soleplate glides across the material very well.
- Excellent steam function.
- Temperature control is very easy to adjust.

BAD POINTS

- None to mention.

81% Philips GC4420

PRICE $140

GOOD POINTS

- Excellent at ironing wool, cotton and denim, and very good on organza and linen.
- Easy to use.

BAD POINTS

- Water level is hard to see.

PRODUCT	PERFORMANCE			FEATURES						SPECIFICATIONS				
Brand / model (in rank order)	Overall score (%)	Performance score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Soleplate type	Self-cleaning	Power-on light	Drip protection	Cord storage	Auto shut-off (min, horizontal/vertical)	Cord length (m)	Weight (kg)	Stated wattage (W)	Contact	Price ($)
Philips GC2860	91	95	83	Non-stick	√		√	√	0:30/9	3.0	1.1	2200	philips.com.au	70
Sunbeam Verve 68 Resilium SR6800	84	87	77	Non-stick		√	√	√	0:30/15	3.0	1.4	2400	sunbeam.com.au	119
Philips GC4420	81	85	71	Non-stick	√		√	√	0:30/8	3.0	1.4	2400	philips.com.au	140
Tefal Primaglide 31 FV2231	79	82	73	Non-stick	√			√	–/–	2.0	1.1	2000	tefal.com.au	50
Tefal Aquaspeed Autoclean 275 FV5275	77	80	70	Non-stick	√	√	√	√	0:30/8	2.4	1.3	2400	tefal.com.au	130
Kambrook SpeedSteam KI460KM (A)	76	78	70	Non-stick	√		√	√	–/–	2.5	0.8	2000	kambrook.com.au	60
Sunbeam Verve 62 Platinum SR6200	75	77	71	Non-stick		(B)	√	√	–/–	3.0	1.4	2400	sunbeam.com.au	65
Russell Hobbs RHC903	70	73	64	Stainless steel	√		√	√	0:30/8	1.8	1.2	2200	salton.com.au	80
Kambrook Steamline KI730	67	67	67	Non-stick	√		√	√	–/–	2.5	1.0	2000	kambrook.com.au	30
Homemaker KB-166A2	45	40	56	Non-stick	√				–/–	1.8	0.9	2000	kmart.com.au	14
Abode ETA-17A2	42	40	47	Non-stick				√	–/–	1.8	0.7	1400	woolworths.com.au	20

USING THE TABLE Scores The overall score is made up of: Performance 70%; Ease of use 30%. **Features and specifications** See What to Look For, opposite.
Price Recommended retail, as of November 2010. **TABLE NOTES (A)** Exclusive to Kmart; technically identical to the Kambrook KI400. **(B)** Older stock may not have a power-on light.

ABOUT THE REST

Both **Tefal** irons are good overall, and the **Primaglide 31 FV2231** is well priced at $50, but its temperature control isn't easy to adjust and it has no automatic shut-off. The **Aquaspeed Autoclean 275 FV5275** doesn't quite measure up to its less expensive stablemate; its water level is hard to see and its steam output is a little low.

The **Kambrook SpeedSteam KI460KM's** soleplate tends to drag, and while the **Sunbeam Verve 62 SR6200** performs very well on most materials, it's poor on linen.

The **Russell Hobbs** isn't as easy to use as the recommended models because its water level is hard to see, its steam output is a little low and its temperature control is hard to adjust.

The **Kambrook Steamline KI730** is very good on cotton, denim and silk, and good on organza, but mediocre on wool and poor on linen. And like the other Kambrook on test, its soleplate tends to drag.

The **Homemaker** and **Abode** are poor performers overall (although the Homemaker is very good, if slow, on denim and linen). Their soleplates drag, their steam output is low, they tend to leak at lower temperatures and they just aren't generally as easy to use as the other models. Kmart disputed our results for the Homemaker, saying that on correct settings, it shouldn't leak as it did in our test.

Our Best Buy iron, the Philips GC2860, is the only excellent performer on test and is half the price of the other Philips machine

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Weight A light iron is easy to move but needs more downward pressure, while a heavier one needs less pressure but takes more effort to move and lift.

Soleplate A non-stick soleplate is usually easier to keep clean than a stainless steel one, but you need to be careful not to scratch it (for example on zips) as scratches may cause the iron to drag over time. Non-stick soleplates use materials such as ceramics, palladium or Teflon, and often have trade names such as "Durilium" and "Steamglide". Polished stainless steel can work well but can also be susceptible to scratching and staining.

Auto shut-off cuts off power to the iron after it's been left immobile for a certain period of time. If it's left in the horizontal position, the cut-off time is usually about 30 seconds; if upright, it's much longer – about eight minutes or more. Most give an audible signal when they shut off.

Power-on light This safety feature lets you know the iron's on and therefore hot.

Cord storage Look for a specially designed heel to wrap the cord around and a clip to secure it.

Self-cleaning means you can set the iron to remove scale deposits that could clog the steam valve and soleplate holes.

Drip protection prevents water from dripping through the soleplate and potentially staining the fabric, particularly at low temperatures.

Button groove* A gap between the iron and soleplate makes it easier to iron around buttons.

Variable steam* allows you to control the amount of steam while you iron, so you can turn it up when you're trying to get creases out of linen (for example) and turn it down for more sensitive fabrics.

Vertical steam* Also known as "shot of steam", this allows you to iron heavy items such as curtains or a suit jacket while they're hanging up.

Thermostat light* turns on when the iron is heating and off when the preset temperature is reached.

Features marked with an asterisk (*) are common to all irons on test. They all also have built-in water sprays to assist with difficult jobs, and claim they can use tap water.

STORY DENIS GALLAGHER

Home advantage

Landline phones are moving with the times to stay relevant in your household.

NUTSHELL

>> Landline phones have improved markedly over the years, with a combination of corded and cordless as well as Bluetooth support options now readily available.

>>Some models on test allow you to use your landline handset as an additional mobile phone.

While more people are ditching their fixed-line phones in favour of a mobile, many still see the landline as an important part of their communication mix (see Number Crunch, opposite). When you make a call to a landline, you have peace of mind knowing you can generally talk as long as you want and not have to worry about flag fall charges or unnecessarily complex mobile plans.

Our What to Buy recommendations (right) include an interesting selection of models with features for users wanting to embrace new technologies, as well as for those who just want a phone that's loud enough to hear, simple to operate and works throughout the home without the signal dropping out.

Phones using the Digital Enhanced Cordless Telecommunications (DECT) system operate within the 1.8-1.9GHz band, an area reserved for cordless phones, and make up all but one of the models on test (see table, page 60). DECT phones should be less prone to interference from devices such as WiFi wireless routers and media players that operate in the increasingly congested 2.4GHz band.

All models on test include a base phone unit with digital answering machine, as well as an additional cordless handset and charger. The base unit connects to a phone line jack and power point to operate, while the additional charger and extra handset can be used wherever there is a spare power point. >

HOW WE TEST

All models are tested at an external lab following a method developed by CHOICE, meeting strict quality standards.

Ease of use Our testers consider factors such as quality of the instruction manual, feel and comfort of the handset, whether the screen is easy to read and any other special features.

Sound quality A panel of users makes calls in a moderately noisy environment and assesses speech clarity, speech loudness, line noise and background noise on each model.

Range The base station for each phone on test is placed within a single-storey building with solid concrete foundation and walls, while the handset under test is located outside on the opposite side of one wall obstructing the line of sight. The tester continues to make phone calls, with the maximum range determined either by the radio link being cut or a subjective assessment that voice quality makes conversation difficult. While we used the same building for this test as previously, the absolute differences in range from one test can't be directly compared to a previous test as other factors such as time of testing and changes in atmosphere can have an effect.

Battery life After fully charging each phone's battery, our testers set the phones to talk and standby, and time how long each takes to fully discharge. They also time how long the phones take to recharge.

Answering machine Our testers look at ease of use when creating a message and managing calls, as well as sound clarity and quality for both the message recording and the message left by the caller.

Maximum volume Volume measurements are conducted using a decibel meter, placed 1m horizontally away from the base under test. Our tester records the handset and base ringer loudness for the base unit, the volume for the speaker in the handset and the earpiece volume (when holding the handset to the ear).

WHAT TO BUY

CORDLESS ONLY

83% Panasonic KX-TG8522ALB

PRICE $200

This top-scoring Panasonic phone is the easiest to use, with good sound quality and one of the best reception ranges on test. Backlit keys help you operate the phone in low light, and it is also the only phone on test with a colour display. Support for a headset enables hands-free conversations and it has a large message capacity for the answering machine. Although this phone does not have a T-Coil (see What to Look For, page 60), the ability to set high volume levels for the ringer, earpiece and speaker make it a good option for hearing-impaired users if you don't use a hearing aid.

80% Uniden XDECT R035BT+1

PRICE $230

The Uniden R035BT+1 has very good range, is hearing aid-compatible and is easy to use, although the lack of headset support may be an issue for some users. The most noteworthy feature of this phone is the ability to use the handsets as additional mobile phones. This means you can make and take mobile calls from your handset as well as share contact lists between the landline and the mobile phone. Our testers found the setup for the Bluetooth connection easy to carry out, with a range of about 10m from the base unit.

BEST BUY

83% Panasonic KX-TG5522ALB

PRICE $140

The KX-TG5522ALB is good value for money, with an easy-to-use handset, backlit keys and very good reception range. While the overall sound quality was judged the best of the models on test, the maximum volume level for the earpiece (where you hold the handset up to your ear to listen) is the quietest on test and the handset lacks support for a headset, which may be an issue for people with a hearing impairment.

CORDED/CORDLESS COMBINATION

83% Uniden SSE27+1

BEST BUY

PRICE $150

The Uniden SSE27+1 combines a traditional corded phone base with an additional cordless handset to give users the best of both worlds. As well as a top score for reception range, the SSE27 has extra features to help both those with sight and hearing impairments. Support for a headset is useful in noisy environments, while the key buttons on the corded phone and handset are large and clearly marked. A text-to-speech feature announces the number when you dial and the name of the caller, while visual cues such as blinking red lights indicate an incoming call. The phone is also hearing aid-compatible with a T-Coil. Another useful feature in common with the other corded/cordless combination phones on test (see table, page 60) is the ability to operate during a power blackout.

NUMBER CRUNCH

740,000+
The number of cordless phones sold in Australia in 2009/10.

75%
The percentage of landline phones accounted for by DECT phones, the only type of landline enjoying increased sales.

DID YOU KNOW?

NiMH batteries don't contain toxic cadmium and so are safer to dispose of than older-style NiCads. Two of the models on test, the Uniden SSE27+1 and SSE25+1, use NiCads in their extra handset.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Volume If you're hard of hearing, look for a phone that provides extensive volume adjustment on the handset and a high handset speaker volume.

Call waiting lets you know when someone is trying to call you while you're talking to someone else. Check with your phone network to see if there is an additional charge for this service.

Support for Bluetooth mobiles The three phones that allow support for Bluetooth mobile phones (see table, below) allow you to use your handset as if it were an additional mobile phone. However, the operating range is only 10m (the limit for Bluetooth devices), which may not be very helpful in a large multi-storey house.

Text to speech announces the number when you dial on the keypad and can read and announce the name of the caller.

Hearing aid-compatible (Tele-Coil or T-Coil) support allows the caller's voice to be directly fed from the phone to your hearing aid, helping to filter out background noise when listening through the handset speaker. While the Telstra phones do not have a T-Coil, they claim to meet Hearing Aid Compatible (HAC) requirements, which include appropriate acoustic coupling measures incorporated into the phone's design.

Night mode You can set the phone not to ring during a specified time period – very handy for a good night's sleep.

A dial pad and **speaker on the base unit** allow you to make and take calls when you can't locate the handset.

Handsets supported The number in this table column (below right) shows how many extra handsets of the same model can be purchased and used. Some of the models in the table are available with three or four handsets, although if you already know how many handsets you'll need you should buy the complete set at once rather than adding handsets later.

The ability to page from the base to the handset can be handy, particularly if you leave the phone lying around the house. All phones on test have this ability, while some have two-way paging.

Conference call means you can allow users on the extra handset to join a phone conversation where all parties can hear an open conversation. All models on test have this feature except the Panasonic KX-TG5522ALB.

Phone book allows you to store your favourite contact numbers and dial the number by selecting the contact. Some of the models on test also have a speed-dial feature for up to 10 numbers.

Batteries While all cordless phones should come with rechargeable batteries, some models can use other AAA NiMH rechargeable batteries, which are less expensive and more readily available.

Digital System "DECT 6.0" and "ECO DECT" are marketing names for a virtually identical technology, namely DECT 1.8 – operating within the 1.8-1.9GHz band, a frequency range reserved for cordless phones. Only one

PRODUCT	PERFORMANCE															
Brand / model (in rank order within categories)	Overall score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Sound quality score (%)	Range score (%)	Battery life score (%)	Answering machine score (%)	Talk time (hrs)	Standby time (days)	Charging time (hr:smins)	Power consumption (W, base only)	Power consumption (W, base and phone)	Range (m)	Handset ringer loudness (dB)	Maximum volume for handset speaker (dB)	Maximum earpiece volume (dB)
CORDLESS ONLY															
Panasonic KX-TG8522ALB	83	92	77	87	83	74	16	>10	5:00	0.4	1.5	73	80	82	80
Panasonic KX-TG5522ALB	83	87	79	87	80	74	21	8	5:30	0.3	1.2	73	76	75	67
Uniden XDECT RO35BT+1	80	82	77	82	79	76	14	>10	10:30	0.7	1.1	68	76	78	77
Telstra Long Range 9750 Twin	76	85	78	59	86	75	18	>10	8:00	0.6	1.2	49	78	74	72
Uniden SSE25+1	71	85	78	43	79	76	14	>10	15:00	0.8	1.2	36	73	83	88
Telstra Long Range 9750BT Twin	70	87	76	43	73	79	11	>10	12:00	0.9	1.7	36	80	78	78
Oricom BT9500-2	69	79	75	48	72	74	14	9	8:00	0.7	1.3	40	82	88	77
Oricom M900-2RD	68	78	76	43	85	59	17	>10	9:00	1.0	1.4	36	75	71	71
Panasonic KX-TG4392ALT	67	84	74	48	66	60	8	>10	3:00	1.0	2.0	40	75	79	70
CORDED/CORDLESS COMBINATION															
Uniden SSE27+1	83	84	78	93	79	76	14	>10	4:30	0.9	0.6	78	73	86	78
Panasonic KX-TG6461ALT	75	86	77	54	85	80	21	9	4:00	1.0	1.0	45	76	77	82
Telstra Long Range 9750CC Twin	75	85	78	54	86	75	18	>10	9:00	0.8	0.9	45	80	78	75

USING THE TABLE All models on test deliver remote access for messages and all have caller ID (if supported on the phone's network). **Scores** The overall score is made up of: Ease of use: 25%; Sound quality: 25%; Range: 25%; Battery life: 15%; Answering machine: 10%. **Charging times** are rounded to the nearest 30 minutes. **Price** Recommended retail, as of December 2010.

model, the Panasonic KX- TG4392ALT (the worst performer on test), does not use DECT 1.8.

Large, clearly marked keys and a **backlit keypad** can help when making calls in low light.

Hands-free A headset jack, where you can plug in a headset with a microphone, frees up your hands to continue other tasks while carrying out a conversation.

ABOUT THE REST

The **Telstra Long Range 9750 Twin** is a good choice for those wanting a standard cordless phone and extra handset package, particularly if you're a Telstra customer, as you get dedicated buttons to access Telstra services such as call waiting and forwarding. However, its range is not as good as the top performers and it lacks some useful features such as headset support.

The **Panasonic KX-TG6461ALT** and **Telstra Long Range 9750CC Twin**, like the **Uniden SSE27+1** combine a traditional corded phone base with an additional cordless handset and deliver similar features and performance at the same price. The Telstra model includes dedicated buttons for Telstra services, while the Panasonic allows you to replace the batteries in the handset with standard rechargeable NiMH batteries.

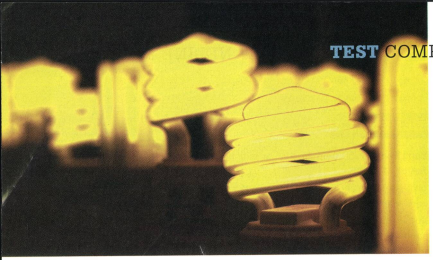
The **Uniden SSE25+1** shares a similar design philosophy to the Uniden SSE27+1 in helping hearing- and sight-impaired users, with large keypad buttons, visual cues such as blinking lights to indicate an incoming call and simple button control over volume and ringtone levels. The SSE25 also has a text-to-speech feature, announcing the number being dialled and caller ID name.

The standout feature for both the **Telstra Long Range 9750BT** and **Oricom BT9500-2** is the ability to pair with a Bluetooth-enabled mobile phone, allowing the handset to operate as a mobile phone. Of these two models, the Telstra is easier to use and also has a backlit keypad, while the Oricom has the loudest volume on test for its handset speaker.

The **Oricom M900-2RD** and **Panasonic KX-TG4392ALT** lack many of the features available on most of the other phones on test, although the Oricom is the lowest-priced model. The comparatively poor performance of the 5.8GHz Panasonic illustrates why DECT phones operating at 1.8GHz are proving to be the most popular landline option in Australian homes.

FEATURES								SPECIFICATIONS								
Backlit keypad	Headset jack	Support for Bluetooth mobiles	Text to speech (TTS)	Night mode	Call barring	Hearing aid-compatible	Wall-mountable	Handsets supported	Total phonebook	Total ringtones	Polyphonic ringtones	Battery type	Answering machine recording time (mins)	Digital system (GHz)	Contact	Price ($)
✓	✓			✓	✓		✓	6	200	20	12	4 x NiMH AAA	40	DECT 1.8	panasonic.com.au	200
✓					✓			6	100	15	10	2 x NiMH AAA	20	DECT 1.8	panasonic.com.au	140
✓		✓				✓ (T-Coil)		6	70	8	3	NiMH pack	15	DECT 1.8	uniden.com.au	230
✓						✓	✓	2	250	10	10	NiMH pack	55	DECT 1.8	telstrahomephones.com.au	150
✓	✓		✓	✓ (A)		✓ (T-Coil)	✓	6	70	7	2	NiCad pack	12	DECT 1.8	uniden.com.au	150
✓		✓				✓	✓	2	250	15	15	NiMH pack	100	DECT 1.8	telstrahomephones.com.au	219
		✓						6	100	10	5	NiMH pack	14	DECT 1.8	oricom.com.au	200
								6	50	10	5	2 x NiMH AAA	13	DECT 1.8	oricom.com.au	99
✓	✓			✓			✓	2	50	7	4	2 x NiMH AAA	15	5.8	panasonic.com.au	150
✓	✓		✓	✓ (A)		✓ (T-Coil)	✓	6	70	7	2	NiCad pack	12	DECT 1.8	uniden.com.au	150
✓					✓		✓	6	100	15	10	2 x NiMH AAA	20	DECT 1.8	panasonic.com.au	150
✓						✓	✓	2	250	15	15	NiMH pack	55	DECT 1.8	telstrahomephones.com.au	150

LE NOTES na Not applicable – no ringer on base. **(A)** Has a mute or "do not disturb" button.



STORY CHRIS BARNES

Shining on

The best CFLs are still performing well after 6000 hours, but some haven't lasted the distance.

NUTSHELL

>> After 6000 hours, most of the 15 CFLs on test have had no failures, or only one failure.

>> The best are still putting out a similar level of light to when brand new, but the worst are very noticeably dimmer.

Our compact fluorescent lamps (CFLs) have now been on test for 6000 hours of operation; assuming five hours use per day, that's a little more than three years of use. We reported on their progress at 2000 hours in *CHOICE*, August 2010 (page 54) and found performance and price had greatly improved since the early days of CFLs, but that their equivalent incandescent wattage was often overstated (see Number Crunch, below).

After 6000 hours, several good performers are still going strong. All have dimmed since the start of the test, but the best have dimmed comparatively little, and if you had one of these in your home, its gradual dimming over three (or more) years would probably not be very noticeable.

However, the worst performers have dwindled a lot more; for these, it would be like replacing an incandescent 75W bulb with a 50W. Over three years the effect wouldn't appear quite so drastic, but you'd still notice the change and would likely want to replace these. And among the worst performers for light output are two models that also had several lamps fail, usually some time after the 3000-hour mark.

CHOICE will keep testing CFLs for the next few months to see how many more die and report back accordingly. For more on CFLs, including the full results table, log on to **www.choice.com.au/cfl**. ■

NUMBER CRUNCH

x5

The multiplication factor used on CFL packaging to indicate incandescent equivalent wattage, e.g. a 15W CFL claims to give the same light as a 75W incandescent;

x4

The multiplication factor CHOICE and other independent test labs recommend using instead, i.e. a 15W CFL is usually closer to a 60W incandescent, especially after a few thousand hours' use.

WHAT TO BUY

The CFLs pictured below have very good overall performance; their initial luminosity is excellent, and after 6000 hours it's still good or very good. The Philips Tornado had one failure; the others had none.

GE FLE15HLX/827/B22/T2 $6

Mirabella EEMSES-15 $5

Philips Tornado TND12WWWBC $7.98

The models listed right are good overall, with only one failure (one sample of the GE). Their luminosity isn't generally as good as the top three above, but is still good enough for general lighting.

Prices are per bulb, based on current RRP. Some models come in packs of two. # Discontinued.

Megaman Zenia Tubular 14W W1514-ES-2700K $4.95

 # Osram Dulux EL Longlife 15W/827 $4.75

GE FLE15TBX/827/E27/T3 $4.75

Osram Duluxstar Minitwist 13W/827 $6.50

Woolworths Essentials Mini Compact N3UN15 $3.45

The CFLs listed below score OK or less. Some start out well, but generally their luminosity drops significantly by the 6000-hour mark (they might still be adequate for general lighting, but could be inadequate for reading). And while most of these models had zero, one or two failures, the Mirabella had six failures and the Lightstar eight.

Philips Genie GENIE14WWWES $7.98

Envirolux Lucci 8000hr $6.95

Nelson Aladdin Mini MELQAL15BCS $6.50

Philips Ambiance AMB14WWWES $8.98

Mirabella EEU-15 $5

Nelson Aladdin Mini MELQAL15ESS $6.50

Lightstar CFL3 $8

STORY REBECCA GATTO

The sensor touch

Microwaves with sensor functionality take automatic cooking to the next level.

NUTSHELL

>> 10 microwaves on test, ranging in size from 17L to 32L.

>> Three of our four recommended models have a sensor function for cooking and reheating.

Many microwaves come with auto-cook, reheat and defrost programs designed to make food preparation much easier. But it's the models with a sensor function, which detects the heat and humidity generated by a particular food and cooks it automatically without requiring you to select the time or power level, that truly eliminate guesswork. Our initial aim was to test only microwaves with sensor capabilities and exclude convection models. But not all manufacturers have gone into this market yet, so where a sensor wasn't available we chose models with auto-cook or defrost functions.

All microwaves on test cook fresh vegetables excellently except the Smeg; defrosting chicken is another task that all models perform well. More than half the models on test perform excellently for defrosting mince meat using auto-defrost; however, manufacturer instructions for the LG model specify using the express defrost function, which we found performed poorly. When defrosting, it's easy for parts of the food to start cooking if the auto-defrost time is too long, the power program is poorly designed or the oven's microwave distribution is uneven.

When it comes to reheating non-stirrable foods, many microwaves leave some areas of the food much cooler than others. Ideally, all areas should be above 70°C; however, because a solid food such as quiche can't be stirred, it's difficult for microwaves to achieve a uniform and consistent result throughout. Only the Omega and Whirlpool models are very good and excellent (respectively) for reheating quiche. >

WHAT TO BUY

LG MS2548GR (BEST BUY)	$179
Panasonic NN-ST680S	$359
Sharp R350RW	$241
Samsung ME6104ST	$249

DID YOU KNOW?

USING YOUR MICROWAVE TO DEFROST

The NSW Food Authority recommends defrosting poultry or meat in cold water, your fridge or using a microwave; never defrost by leaving at room temperature on the benchtop. The auto-defrost function on your microwave is useful here. All models on test have this feature and you can defrost by weight (where you select the weight of the food and the defrost time is determined) or by time.

Some microwaves will beep during the cycle, prompting you to check the meat and remove any thawed parts. If you're defrosting a whole chicken, first place it on a microwave-proof rack so that the meat doesn't sit in the thawed ice and start to cook. When the microwave beeps, turn the chicken over and shield the wings and legs by covering these areas with foil (see right). While you shouldn't usually use foil in the microwave, it's necessary when defrosting a whole chicken to prevent smaller areas from overcooking, and manufacturers' instructions state to do so.

No parts of the meat should start to get warm and/or brown during defrosting. You shouldn't defrost meat in its wrapping. After defrosting, allow the meat to stand to get to a uniform temperature - generally about 10 minutes for mince meat and 15 minutes for chicken.

CHOICE ONLINE

To find out how we test microwaves, log on to **www.choice.com.au/microwaves**

WHAT TO BUY

BEST BUY

85% LG MS2548GR

PRICE $179

GOOD POINTS

- Equal-best overall performer, with a very good cooking performance score.
- Excellent for cooking broccoli and defrosting chicken and mince.
- Easy to use.
- Selection of auto-cook programs.
- Controls are grouped together well with a large and bright digital display that is easy to comprehend.
- Good visibility through the door during operation.
- Very easy to clean and touch control panel is easy to wipe over.
- Multi-stage cooking.
- Comparatively inexpensive.

BAD POINTS

- Only OK for reheating a solid food.
- No kitchen timer.

85% Panasonic NN-ST680S

PRICE $359

GOOD POINTS

- Equal-best overall performer, with a very good cooking performance score.
- Excellent for cooking broccoli and defrosting mince and chicken.
- Controls are easy to use and comprehend.
- Very easy to clean – touch control panel is easy to wipe over.
- Easy to use.
- Sensor cook and reheat functions.
- "More or less" time feature.
- Multi-stage cooking.

BAD POINTS

- Only OK for reheating a solid food.
- Only OK visibility through door during operation.

83% Sharp R350RW

PRICE $241

GOOD POINTS

- Very good overall, with a very good cooking performance score.
- Excellent for cooking broccoli and defrosting mince and chicken.
- Easy to use.
- Very easy to clean – touch control panel is easy to wipe over.
- Sensor cook and reheat functions.
- "More or less" time feature.
- Pre-programmed menus.
- Multi-stage cooking.
- Comparatively inexpensive.

BAD POINTS

- Only OK for reheating a solid food.
- Only OK visibility through door during operation.
- Highest running and standby costs.

PRODUCT	PERFORMANCE							FEATURES						SPECIFICATIONS
Brand/model (in rank order)	Overall score (%)	Cooking performance score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Cooking broccoli score (%)	Defrosting mince meat score (%)	Defrosting chicken score (%)	Reheating quiche score (%)	Sensor cook / reheat	Auto-cook	Auto-reheat	Adjust time during cooking	Delayed start or Pre-set cooking	Kitchen timer (standalone)	Multi-stage cooking	Wattage (W)
LG MS2548GR	85	89	77	100	100 (A)	90	66		✓		✓			✓	850
Panasonic NN-ST680S	85	89	74	100	100	90	66	✓			✓		✓	✓	1100
Sharp R350RW	83	87	74	100	100	90	57	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	1100
Samsung ME6104ST	82	92	58	100	100	90	76	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	1000
Sanyo EMS156AW	79	80	77	100	86	90	43		✓	✓			✓	✓	800
Whirlpool VT266SL	78	90	51	100	76	90	93				✓		✓	✓	800 (850 for grill)
Omega OM250XA	77	89	50	100	88	80	86								900
Breville Ikon BMO200	71	77	58	100	100	70	36		✓	✓	✓			✓	900
Smeg SA31-1MX	70	78	51	80	100	80	52		✓	✓	✓				950
Westinghouse WMG281SF	68	74	53	100	70	70	54		✓	✓		✓		✓	900

USING THE TABLE **Scores** The overall score is made up of: Cooking: 70% (made up of four test scores weighted evenly); Ease of use: 30%. **Features** See What to Look For, above right. **Wattage** The higher the wattage, the faster the food will cook. **Price** Recommended retail, as of November 2010, except for the Westinghouse (see **(B)**).

82% Samsung ME6104ST

PRICE $249

GOOD POINTS

- Very good overall, with an excellent cooking performance score.
- Excellent for cooking broccoli and defrosting mince and chicken.
- Good for reheating a solid food.
- Controls are easy to comprehend.
- Easy to clean – touch control panel is easy to wipe over.
- Sensor and auto cook functions.
- "More or less" time feature.
- Multi-stage cooking.
- Comparatively inexpensive.

BAD POINTS

- Only OK for ease of use.
- Very poor visibility through the door during operation.
- Push-button door release is flimsy.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Visibility A bright interior light and large, transparent viewing window allows you to check your food as it cooks. None of the models on test do this exceptionally well; the Westinghouse doesn't even have an internal light.

Cleaning Check there are not too many holes or gaps inside the microwave, or crevices on the outside that can trap food and grease.

Size Try fitting your cooking dishes at the shop before you buy. Ideally, there should be about 10cm of space around the outside of the oven for ventilation, plus 20cm above it.

Automatic functions Automatic defrost prompts you to enter the weight and type of food, then calculates the time.

Quick boost/start is a handy means of starting the oven, usually by pressing a single button. All models on test have this feature except the Sanyo. With most microwaves, the cooking time increases in one or half-minute increments if you press the button again.

Time-adjust during cooking allows you to increase or decrease the time programmed during cooking. All models on test have this except Omega, Sanyo and Westinghouse.

Sensor cooking Sensor programs take automatic functions one step further by measuring vapours emitted during cooking to control the cooking time. Three of our What to Buy models come with this feature.

Multi-stage programming Microwaves with this feature can be programmed to perform a sequence of functions, such as defrost, cook and then leave to stand. The Omega and Smeg don't come with this feature.

Child safety lock means you can push a sequence of buttons to deactivate the microwave. All models on test have this feature.

Kitchen timer can be used to time other things such as boiling an egg. Half the models on test have this feature.

Controls Look for easy-to-use controls and good instructions on the display. The best microwaves won't require you to refer to the instruction manual.

					COSTS		
W x H x D, measured)	Usable cavity dimensions (cm, W x H x D, measured)	Useable shelf (turntable) diameter (cm)	Volume (L, measured)	Contact	Annual standby cost ($, 20c / kWh)	Annual running costs for reheating plated meal once a day ($, 20c / kWh)	Price ($)
30 x 40	33 x 21 x 36	31	25	lge.com.au	4.27	6.09	179
30 x 41	38 x 23 x 37	34	32	panasonic.com.au	3.66	7.17	359
31 x 42	38 x 23 x 37	31	32	sharp.net.au	6.19	8.43	241
30 x 39	35 x 22 x 35	30	27	samsung.com.au	3.18	7.42	249
26 x 37	32 x 17 x 32	23	17	sanyo.com.au	2.27	5.92	149
30 x 44	34 x 20 x 37	27	25	whirlpool.com.au	2.62	6.18	379
30 x 41	35 x 22 x 33	31	25	omegaappliances.com.au	3.36	6.76	269
33 x 44	34 x 23 x 37	31	29	breville.com.au	2.81	6.89	290
35 x 43	33 x 23 x 35	31	28	smeg.com.au	4.85	7.03	490
31 x 44	33 x 23 x 37	29	28	westinghouse.com.au	2.62	6.92	359 (B)

LE NOTES (A) This score is based on using the auto-defrost function; the LG performed poorly when using ss defost. **(B)** Based on the price we paid in October 2010.

ABOUT THE REST

The **Sanyo** and **Breville** rate poorly for reheating a solid food, whereas the **Whirlpool** is the only microwave on test to receive an excellent result. The Whirlpool's grill allows for grill and microwave combination cooking.

The **Omega** is very good for reheating a solid food.

All microwaves on test are excellent for cooking broccoli except the **Smeg**, which was very good. However, the Smeg and **Breville** are both excellent for defrosting mince.

The **Sanyo** achieves the equal-highest ease of use score; its controls are easy and intuitive to use. However, its 17L internal capacity is the smallest of the lot.

The **Westinghouse** rates well for cooking and also has a grill, but is let down by its ease of use. It is the only model on test to have a pre-set cooking feature that allows you to put your food into the microwave and set a time of the day to start cooking.

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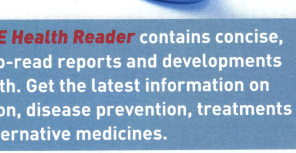

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CHOICE Health Reader is edited by **Dr Norman Swan**, one of the first medically qualified journalists in Australia. He is the winner of three Walkley Awards, Australian Academy of Science medal recipient, host of *Health Report* on ABC Radio National, presenter of *Health Minutes* on ABC NewsRadio and has appeared as the doctor on Network Ten's *The Biggest Loser*.

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A full index from 2007 onwards can be found at www.choiceextra.com.au (see instructions, below right). **Bold** type indicates a product test, member survey or user trial report. Unbolded type indicates a CHOICE research report. * Indicates an update, addition or correction.

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The winner of this month's best entry goes to H. Pham, who happily enjoys a bit of fusion cuisine. Thanks also to A. Delaney, N. Thomson, T. Mullaney, G. Holyoak, O. Manor and J. Dillon for their contributions to this month's Hard Word. If you have any examples you think deserve to be on this page, send them to The Hard Word, CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville, NSW 2204. Please don't email us your entries – we need the unmarked originals.

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ALL AGES ... EXCEPT SOME

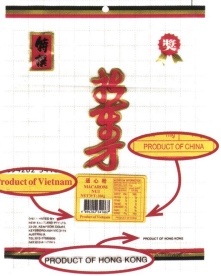
11-year-old Alex feels justifiably miffed that "all ages" doesn't include 11-year-olds. Or anyone under 18, for that matter.

SHORT OF PLAYERS FOR THE FOOTY TEAM?

With this handy device you can convert a horse-riding lass into a fire truck-riding lad.

MULTI-KULTI MACARONI

This Macaroni Nui, which has borrowed the origins of its name from Italy, doesn't quite know where it comes from: Vietnam, China or Hong Kong.



*Thawed for your convenience

FRESHLY THAWED

We'd question whether something that's thawed is "fresh". We'd also question its "convenience", given you can't refreeze thawed food for later use.

THE GREAT TASTE OF NOTHINGNESS

For those who find water to be bursting with flavour.

ASTONISHING ALCHEMY

Vanilla biscuits made only of oil? Yuck.

WHAT A GAS!

If instruction number 5 applies, it's probably already too late for instruction number 6...

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